

GUY DE MAUPASSANT
THE MOUNTAIN INN
AND OTHER STORIES

A NEW TRANSLATION

BY

H. N. P. SLOMAN



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INTRODUCTION

GUY DE MAUPASSANT was born in 1850 at the Château de Miromesnil, a seventeenth-century mansion situated in a magnificent park in Normandy some six miles south of Dieppe; his father had leased the property for a few years and it was here first, and later at his mother's house at Étretat, that his son passed his childhood. His parents' married life was unhappy and the boy saw little of his father. He was educated at the seminary at Yvetot and at the private Institution Leroy-Petit and then at the Lycée Corneille at Rouen. He entered the Civil Service after a period in the army as a conscript, which coincided with the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, though he saw no actual fighting. He worked in the Ministries of Marine and of Public Instruction in Paris for ten years. Thus the background of most of his stories is the France of the early years of the Third Republic from 1870 to 1890. He was encouraged to write by his godfather, the great stylist Flaubert; and in 1880 he published a volume of verse and, in Zola's *Soirées de Médan*, *Boule de Suif*, one of his greatest 'nouvelles' or long short stories. From this date till his early death in 1893 – he died in an asylum of general paralysis of the insane, the result of a venereal disease for which no cure was then known – he lived by his pen. His output was phenomenal; in thirteen years he wrote in addition to his verse six full-length novels, three volumes of *Travel Sketches*, four plays, and some 300 stories. His verse and his plays have been forgotten and his novels are comparatively little read to-day; it is as a writer of short stories that his immortality is secure and his influence on other writers in that *genre*, abroad as well as in France, has been marked.

Guy de Maupassant belonged to the Naturalist school, of which Zola and Flaubert were the leaders; these writers carried further the principles of the Realist school of Balzac, who had died in 1850. His observation of life is keen and detailed, if sometimes cynical and even coarse; he studied all classes of contemporary France

with equal interest and detachment, from the Normandy peasants to all ranks of Parisian society, prostitutes, civil servants, artists, soldiers, both officers and privates, and members of the old families of the *noblesse* of the *Ancien Régime* as well as of the *petite bourgeoisie*, to which he himself belonged and in which he was always most at home.

He summed up his own attitude to his art in the words: 'For me psychology in a novel or a story consists in this: to show the inner man by his life.'

H. N. P. S.

THE MOUNTAIN INN

LIKE all the wooden inns in the high Alps at the foot of glaciers in wild rocky gorges between snowy peaks, which afford shelter to travellers crossing high passes, the Schwarenbach Inn serves those traversing the Gemmi Pass.

It remains open for six months, managed by Jean Hauser's family; then, as soon as the snows begin to pile up, blocking the valley and making the descent to Leuk impossible, the women, the father, and the three sons go away, leaving as caretakers the old guide, Gaspard Hari, with the young guide, Ulrich Kunzi, and Sam, the big Saint-Bernard.

The two men and the dog live in their snowy prison till the spring, with nothing to look at but the great snow slopes of the Balmhorn with its ring of pale gleaming peaks; they are shut in, completely buried beneath the snow, which rises round them and, enveloping and crushing the tiny house in its embrace, piles up on the roof, reaches up to the windows and blocks the door.

It was the day when the Hauser family were to return to Leuk, as winter was approaching and the descent becoming dangerous.

Three mules went on ahead, laden with their personal effects and belongings and led by the three sons. The mother, Jeanne Hauser, and her daughter, Louise, mounted a fourth mule and set out after them. The father followed, accompanied by the two guardians, who were to escort the family as far as the top of the pass.

First they went round the small lake, already frozen, at the bottom of the rocky depression in front of the inn; then they went on down the valley which was as white as a clean sheet, dominated on both sides by snow-covered mountains.

The sun was pouring down on the dazzling white carpet of frozen snow, from which was refracted a blinding cold glare, there

was no sign of life in this sea of mountains, no movement in the vast solitude, and not a sound broke the dead silence.

Gradually the young guide, Ulrich Kunzi, a tall, long-legged Swiss, left old Hauser and old Gaspard Hari behind in order to catch up the mule on which the two women were riding. The younger one watched him coming, her sad eyes seeming to invite him. She was a short, fair peasant girl, whose milk-white complexion and tow hair appeared to have been bleached by her long sojourns amid the snow and ice.

When he caught up with the animal on which she was riding, he put his hand on its hind-quarters and slowed up. Mother Hauser began to talk to him, repeating in great detail all her advice for their wintering. This was the first time he was to stay up there, while old Hari had already spent fourteen winters under the snow in the Schwarenbach Inn.

Ulrich Kunzi listened uncomprehendingly and kept his eyes on the girl. From time to time he would say: 'Yes, Madame Hauser!' but his thoughts seemed far away and his calm expression remained unchanged.

They reached the Lake of Daube, whose long level surface, now frozen, filled the valley bottom. On the right the dark rocks of the Daubenhorn rose steeply above the immense moraines of the Loenimern glacier, dominated by the Wildstrubel.

As they neared the top of the Gemmi Pass, where the descent to Leuk begins, suddenly the boundless horizon of the Valais Alps opened out before their eyes on the other side of the deep Rhône valley. In the distance rose a host of white peaks of different shapes, flat-topped or pointed, gleaming in the sun, the two horns of the Mischabel, the mighty mass of the Weisshorn, the clumsy Brunegg-horn, the formidable towering triangle of the Matterhorn, killer of men, and that monstrous flirt, the Dent-Blanche.

Below them in a deep depression at the bottom of a terrifying precipice, they caught sight of Leuk, whose houses looked like grains of sand dropped in this great cleft, one end of which is

blocked by the Gemmi, while the other gives access to the Rhône.

The mule stopped on the edge of the path, which leads in zigzags, winding to and fro in surprising curves along the right flank of the mountain down to the tiny village, almost invisible below, and the women dismounted in the snow. The two elder men had joined them.

'Come along!' said old Hauser; 'good-bye! Keep your spirits up! Cheerio till next year!'

Old Hari repeated: 'Till next year!'

They embraced and Mme Hauser held out her cheek to be kissed and so did the girl.

When it was Ulrich Kunzi's turn, he whispered in Louise's ear: 'Don't forget us up here!'

She replied 'No' in such a low voice that he guessed rather than heard her answer.

'Come along!' repeated Jean Hauser, 'good-bye and keep well!'

And taking the lead he began the descent. All three soon passed out of sight at the first bend. The two men returned in the direction of the Schwarenbach Inn. They walked slowly side by side in silence. That was that! Now they would be alone with each other for four or five months.

Presently Gaspard Hari began telling how he had spent last winter; he had been there with Michel Canol, who was now too old to do it again; he might get ill during the long period they were cut off. But they had not been bored; all one had to do was to make the best of things from the start. It was not long before one found things to do, games and other ways of making the time pass.

Ulrich Kunzi listened with lowered eyes; he was following in imagination the party making their way down to the village by the zigzags of the Gemmi.

Soon they sighted the inn, scarcely visible it was so small, just a dark speck at the foot of the great snow-field.

As they opened the door, Sam, the great shaggy-haired dog, began to gambol round them.

'Come along, my boy!' said old Hari, 'we've got no women here now; we must get our own dinner; you'd better peel the potatoes.'

And the two men, sitting on wooden stools, began making the soup.

The next morning seemed very long to Ulrich Kunzi. Old Hari smoked and spat into the fireplace, while the young man looked out of the window at the gleaming white mountain in front of the house. In the afternoon he went out and, following their route of yesterday, he looked for the hoof-marks of the mule on which the two women had ridden. When he reached the summit of the Gemmi Pass, he lay down on his stomach on the edge of the drop and gazed down at Leuk.

The village in its rock-bound depression was not yet buried in snow. The snow had got quite close, but it had been held up by the pine-woods which sheltered the space round it. The low houses, seen from above, looked like paving stones in a field.

The little Hauser girl was there now in one of those grey houses. Which one? Ulrich Kunzi was too far off to pick them out separately. He would have given anything to go down, while it was still possible.

But the sun had sunk behind the great peak of the Wildstrubel and the young man went back. Old Hari was smoking. When he saw his mate return, he suggested a game of cards and they sat down on opposite sides of the table. They played for a long time, a simple game called '*brisque*', after which they had supper and went to bed.

The following days were just like the first, cloudless and cold, without any fresh snow. Old Gaspard spent the afternoons watching eagles and the rare birds which ventured among the ice-covered heights, while Ulrich usually went to the top of the Gemmi Pass and gazed at the village. Then they played cards or dice or dominos, winning and losing small stakes to give interest to the game.

One morning Hari, who was up first, called his companion. A dense cloud of filmy flakes was falling on and around them, noise-

lessly, gradually burying them under a thick heavy blanket of soft snow. The fall lasted for four days and four nights. They had to clear the door and the window, dig a passage and cut steps to surmount the barrier of frozen snow, which twelve hours of frost had made harder than the granite of the moraines.

From that day they lived imprisoned, hardly venturing outside the house. They had divided up the chores between them and each one did his job as a matter of routine. Ulrich Kunzi undertook all the scrubbing and washing, everything that was necessary to keep the place clean. He chopped the wood too, while Gaspard Hari did the cooking and kept the fire in. This monotonous routine work was interrupted by long games of cards or dice; there were no differences, for both men were quiet and even-tempered. There were never even minor tiffs or sharp words, for they had laid in a stock of patience against their winter in the mountains. Sometimes old Gaspard took his gun and went out after chamois; from time to time he got one and then there was a festive banquet on fresh meat in the Schwarenbach Inn.

One morning he went out on this errand. The thermometer was registering eighteen degrees of frost. The sun was not yet up and the old hunter hoped to surprise the animals near the Wildstrubel.

Ulrich, left alone, stayed in bed till ten o'clock - he was naturally a good sleeper. But he would not have dared to indulge this weakness in the presence of the old guide, who was always up bright and early. He dallied over his mid-day meal with Sam, who also spent his days and nights asleep in front of the fire; presently he felt depressed, frightened by the utter loneliness; he suddenly missed his daily game of cards, as one always feels any break in the established routine of life. So he went out to meet his companion, who was due back at four o'clock.

The snow had levelled the whole of the deep valley, filling up the clefts, hiding the two lakes and draping the rocks.

It was three weeks since Ulrich had been back to his look-out above the village at the top of the descent. He now returned to it

before scaling the slopes leading to the Wildstrubel. Leuk was now under snow too and the houses were indistinguishable, buried under their white pall.

After that he turned to the right and made for the Loemmern glacier. He walked with the raking stride of a mountaineer, digging his iron-shod alpenstock into the snow, which was now as hard as a rock. All the time he kept a sharp look-out for a tiny black speck moving over the immense snow field in the distance.

He stopped on the edge of the glacier, wondering if the old man had gone this way after all, but he started off along the moraine, increasing his pace as his anxiety mounted.

The sun was sinking and the snow was getting pink; a keen cold wind was blowing in gusts over the icy surface. Ulrich gave a shout, shrill, resonant, long drawn out. His voice soared up in the deathly silence of the sleeping mountains; it echoed in the distance over the deep, motionless waves of icy snow, like the cry of a bird over the waves of the sea, then it was swallowed up in silence; there was no answer.

He started off again, the sun had set behind the summits still flushed with the reflection of the crimson sky, but the valleys deep below were darkening.

The young man was suddenly afraid, he felt that the stillness, the cold, the solitude, the wintry death of these mountains was penetrating into him and would stop and freeze his blood, stiffen his limbs and turn him into a motionless figure of ice. He began to run, making for the inn. The old man, he kept thinking, had returned, while he was away. He had taken a different way and would be sitting before the fire with a dead chamois at his feet.

He soon sighted the inn but there was no smoke rising from the chimney. He ran quicker and opened the door. Sam rushed out to welcome him back, but Gaspard Hari had not returned.

Frightened, Ulrich swung round as if expecting to find his companion hiding in a corner. Then he lit the fire again and made the soup, always hoping to see the old man coming back.

From time to time he went out to see if he was not in sight. Night had fallen; a thin, yellow crescent moon, about to set behind the peaks, cast a dim, pale, ghostly half-light over the scene. The young man came in again, sat down and warmed his feet and hands, imagining possible accidents. Gaspard might have broken a leg or fallen into a crevasse or slipped and sprained an ankle. He might be lying in the snow, paralysed and stiff with cold, a lost soul, calling for help perhaps, shouting with all the power of his lungs in the silence of the night.

But where was he? The mountain was so vast, so rough, so dangerous to approach, especially at this time of year, that it would have taken ten or twenty guides a week to cover the mountain and find a man in this immense area.

Nevertheless Ulrich Kunzi determined to set out with Sam if Gaspard Hari had not returned between midnight and one o'clock, and he made his preparations.

He put food for two days into a rucksack, took his steel crampons, wound a long thin rope round his chest, and tested his alpenstock and ice-axe. After that he waited. The fire was blazing in the chimney and the big dog snoring in the firelight; the clock was ticking regularly in its resonant wooden case like a heart beating.

He waited, straining his ears to catch any sound in the distance, shivering when the light breeze whispered round walls and roof. Midnight struck and he shuddered. Still feeling upset and nervy, he put some water on to boil in order to have a cup of hot coffee before starting.

When the clock struck one he got up, woke Sam, opened the door and set off towards the Wildstrubel. He climbed for five hours, scaling the rocks and cutting steps in the ice, using his crampons, up and up, sometimes hauling the dog up, if it had stopped at the foot of a slope too steep for it. It was six o'clock when he reached the top of one of the peaks where the old man often went after chamois. There he waited for the sun to rise.

The sky began to grow pale overhead; and suddenly a

mysterious light from no visible source lit up the great army of dim peaks extending for a hundred leagues round. It was as if this strange half-light came from the snow itself and was reflected into space. Gradually the highest summits in the distance flushed a lovely flesh pink and a red sun rose behind the massive giants of the Bernese Alps.

Ulrich Kunzi started off again. He walked like a tracker, bent forward, looking for foot-prints, saying to his dog: 'Hunt, old man hunt!'

He now made his way down the mountain again, scanning the chasms and sometimes uttering a long-drawn-out cry, which was immediately swallowed up in the silent immensity. He kept putting his ear to the ground listening. Sometimes he thought he heard a voice and began to run, shouting himself. When he heard nothing more, he sat down exhausted and helpless. About noon he had his lunch and fed the dog, who was as tired as his master. Afterwards he resumed his search.

When evening came he was still walking, having covered thirty miles of mountain. Finding himself too far from home to get back and too tired to drag himself any farther, he dug a hole in the snow and crouched in it with the dog under a blanket which he had brought. There they lay, man and dog, pressed against each other for warmth and still frozen to the marrow.

Ulrich hardly slept, his mind haunted by dreams and his limbs shaking.

Just before dawn he got up; his legs were stiff as iron rods. He had lost his nerve and he could have screamed aloud in his terror. Whenever he thought he heard a sound his heart thumped so violently that he almost collapsed.

All at once he realized that he, too, would die of cold in this lonely spot and fear of death whipped up his energy and restored his morale. He was now on his way down towards the inn, stumbling and getting up again, Sam trailing behind him, limping on three legs. They did not reach Schwarenbach till four o'clock in the after-

noon; the place was empty. The young man lit the fire, had a meal and went to sleep, too exhausted to think clearly.

He slept for a very long time the sleep of the dead; but suddenly a voice shouting his name 'Ulrich', roused him from his torpor and brought him to his feet. Was it a dream? Was it one of those unaccountable nightmares which disturb our sleep when we are worried? No, he could still hear it, a loud cry, which had entered his body through the ear and penetrated to the tips of his twitching fingers. He was sure someone had shouted the name 'Ulrich'. There was someone there, close to the house; he was quite certain of it. So he opened the door and bellowed with the full force of his lungs: 'Is that you, Gaspard?' There was no answer. Not a sound, not a whisper, not a groan, nothing! It was dark with a ghostly half-light off the snow.

The wind had risen, the icy wind which splits rocks and leaves nothing alive on those deserted heights. It came in short gusts, more withering, more deadly than the fiery blast from the desert. Ulrich shouted again: 'Gaspard! Gaspard! Gaspard!'

He paused but everything remained silent on the mountain. He felt a sudden shock of panic terror and rushed back into the inn, shut and bolted the door and then collapsed shaking on to a chair, convinced that he had been called by his companion at the moment of death.

He was as certain of it as one is of being alive and eating bread. Old Gaspard Hari had been lying dying for two days and three nights somewhere, in some hole, in one of those deep crevasses, whose spotless whiteness is more sinister than the darkness of a vault. He had been dying slowly for two days and three nights and he had died just at that moment, thinking of his companion. His spirit, as soon as it was free, had flown to the inn, where Ulrich was asleep, and it was this spirit which had called him by means of that mysterious terrible power which the spirits of the dead have to haunt the living. It was this voiceless spirit which had communicated direct with the overwrought spirit of the sleeper; it had

uttered its last farewell or perhaps a reproach or curse on the man who had given up the search too soon.

Ulrich sensed its presence there, quite close, on the other side of the wall, behind the door he had just closed. It was prowling round, like a night bird brushing a lighted window-pane with its wings. The distracted young man was ready to shriek in his terror. He wanted to run right away but he dared not go out of the house; he did not dare now and he would never again dare go out, for the ghost would be there day and night round the house, until the old guide's body was found and buried in the consecrated ground of a cemetery.

Day dawned and Kunzi recovered himself a little in the cheerful sunlight. He got his own dinner and made some soup for the dog, and then sat, not moving, slumped on a chair in an agony of fear, thinking of the old man lying in the snow.

As soon as darkness fell on the mountains fresh terrors assailed him. He was now walking up and down in the kitchen, in the dim light of a candle; he strode from one end of the room to the other, listening, listening for the terrifying cry of last night to break the sinister silence outside. He was alone, poor devil, more utterly alone than anyone had ever been before! He was alone in this measureless waste of snow, alone six thousand feet above the world of men, above all human habitations, above the bustle, the din, the throb of life, alone in ice-cold space. He was tortured by a wild desire to escape anywhere, anyhow, to throw himself over the precipice down to Leuk; but he did not dare even to open the door, convinced that the other, the dead man, would bar his path, in order that he too might not be left alone up there.

About midnight, tired of walking, he dozed off at last on a chair, for he shrank from his bed as from a haunted spot.

Suddenly the stident cry of the night before smote on his ears so piercingly shrill that he stretched out his arms to push the ghost away and fell backwards over the chair.

Sam, woken up by the noise, began to howl as frightened dogs

will and moved round the room to discover where the danger came from. When he got near the door, he sniffed under it, snorting and snuffling loudly, his coat bristling and his tail erect, growling.

Kunzi, mad with terror, had got up and, grabbing his chair by the leg, he screamed: 'Don't come in or I'll kill you!' And the dog, excited by the threat, barked wildly at the enemy who was defying his master's voice. Sam gradually calmed down and returned to his place near the fire, but he was still uneasy, his head erect and his eyes blazing, growling and showing his teeth.

Ulrich recovered himself but, feeling weak from the shock, went for a bottle of brandy from the chest and drank several glasses one after the other. His brain became fuddled, his fear left him and a fiery fever coursed through his veins.

Next day he hardly ate at all, only drinking the spirit. And for several days on end after that he remained as stupid as a brute beast. Whenever the thought of Gaspard Hari came back to his mind he went on drinking till he fell to the floor overcome by the alcohol. And he lay there on his face, dead drunk, his limbs paralysed, snoring, with his forehead on the ground. But he had hardly digested the maddening, burning liquor when the same cry 'Ulrich' woke him up like a bullet in the brain. And he dragged himself to his feet, still tottering, catching hold of things so as not to fall and calling Sam to help him. The dog, who seemed to have gone mad like his master, rushed to the door, scratched at it with his claws and gnawed at it with his long white teeth, while the young man, with head thrown back, swallowed, as if it was a drink after a race, great gulps of the brandy, which would again dull his brain and his memory and his frantic terror.

In three weeks he consumed his whole store of spirits. But this orgy of drunkenness only deadened his fears for the moment and they returned in a more acute form as soon as he could no longer allay them in this way. His delusion, aggravated by a month of intoxication and growing more vivid all the time in the absolute solitude, was working in his brain like a piercing drill. He now

walked up and down in the house all the time like a caged beast, putting his ear close to the door to discover if the other was outside and defying him through the wall. But, as soon as he went to sleep, overcome by fatigue, he again heard the voice, which brought him to his feet with a start.

At last, one night, with the desperate courage of a coward cornered, he rushed to the door and flung it open to see who was calling him and force him to be silent.

A gust of cold air which froze him to the bone struck him full in the face, and he slammed the door and shot the bolts, not noticing that Sam had dashed out. Then, shivering, he flung wood on the fire and sat down to warm himself in front of it; but suddenly he started; someone was scrabbling at the wall, whining. Terrified, he shouted: 'Get away!'

A long-drawn, mournful howl was the reply. Now panic fear unseated what was left of his reason. He kept yelling: 'Get away!' turning round and round looking for a corner to hide. The other, still moaning, went all round the house, rubbing against the wall. Ulrich rushed to the great oak chest containing the crockery and food, and raising it by a superhuman effort he dragged it to the door to form a defensive barricade. Next he made a pile of all the rest of the furniture, the mattresses and palliasses and chairs, and blocked up the window as one does in face of a besieging enemy.

But the creature outside was now uttering a loud dismal wailing, to which the young man replied with similar howls.

Several days and nights passed while the two continued howling at each other. The one outside went on circling round the house, scratching at the walls with his claws so violently that he seemed intent on demolishing the whole building. The one inside followed every movement, bending down with his ear glued against the stone and answering every moan with hair-raising shrieks.

One evening all sounds ceased and Ulrich sat down so dead beat that he fell asleep immediately. When he woke up, his mind was a



blank; it was as though every thought had been drained out of his brain by the sleep of exhaustion. He felt hungry and had a meal.

Winter was over and the Gemmi Pass was open again; so the Hauser family started off to return to the inn.

As soon as they reached the top of the pass, the women mounted their mule and began to speak of the two men they would meet presently. They were somewhat surprised that one of the men had not come down a few days earlier, as soon as the path was practicable, to give news of their long winter sojourn.

At last they sighted the inn still under a blanket of snow. The door and the window were shut, but a little smoke was rising from the chimney, which reassured old Hauser. When he got near, he saw outside the door the skeleton of an animal that had been torn to pieces by eagles, a large skeleton lying on its side.

They all examined it. 'It must be Sam,' said the mother. And she called out: 'Hullo, Gaspard!' There was an answering cry from inside, a shrill cry like that of an animal. Old Hauser repeated: 'Hullo, Gaspard!' Another cry like the first was the reply.

So the three men, the father and his two sons, tried to open the door. It refused to open. So they took from the empty shed a long beam to use as a battering ram and launched it with all their force. The wood cracked and gave as the planks were shattered; then a loud crash rocked the house and they saw inside, behind the overturned chest, a man standing, with hair falling about his shoulders and a beard down to his breast; his eyes were staring and his clothes hung in tatters.

They did not recognize him till Louise cried: 'It's Ulrich, Mother!' And her mother realized that it *was* Ulrich, though his hair was snow-white.

He let them come in and touch him, but he did not answer the questions put to him. He had to be taken down to Leuk, where the

doctors certified him as insane. It was never discovered what had happened to his companion.

The little Hauser girl nearly died during the summer of a decline, which was put down to the cold on the mountain.

THE RISKS OF RIDING

HECTOR DE GRIBELIN had been brought up in the country on the family estate with an old Abbé as tutor. His people were not well off but they carried on from hand to mouth and kept up appearances.

Then, at the age of twenty, they had got him a job and he went into the Ministry of Marine as a clerk at a pound a week. He had been shipwrecked on the rock that awaits all who are not trained early for the stern battle of life; they look on life through rose-tinted spectacles and do not know the ropes and the dangers. Specialized skills, particular abilities and the spirit of dour determination have not been developed from childhood and they are equipped with neither weapon nor tool to cope with what is in store.

His first three years in the office were hell.

But he made contact with a few friends of the family, elderly folk who had not kept pace with the times and were hard up like himself. They lived in the aristocratic quarter in those depressing streets of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, where he had formed his circle of acquaintances.

Hating modern life, humble but proud, these impoverished aristocrats lived in flats in the tall, dead mansions. Everyone from ground floor to attic in these houses belonged to the old nobility, but money seemed as short on the first floor as on the sixth.

Outmoded prejudices, anxiety about their position, fear of sinking in the social scale were the bugbear of these people, once famous but now faced with ruin owing to the refusal of their men-folk to work. In this society Hector de Gribelin met a girl of good family as poor as himself and married her.

They had two children in four years.

For the next four years the family, hard up and perpetually

harassed, knew no amusements beyond a walk in the Champs-Élysées on Sundays and a few evenings in winter at the theatre thanks to complimentary tickets given them by a colleague.

Then towards the spring a piece of overtime work was entrusted to the clerk by his chief and he received a bonus of three hundred francs in addition to his salary.

When he brought the money home, he said to his wife: 'My dear Henriette, we must treat ourselves to a little outing - what about a picnic for the kids?'

After lengthy discussion they decided to take lunch out into the country.

'Dash it all!' cried Hector, 'it's only once in a way; we'll hire an open carriage for you, the children and the maid, and I'll get a horse from a livery-stable; it'll do me good.'

For a week they talked of nothing but the projected excursion. Every evening, when he got home from the office, Hector picked up his eldest son, set him astride on his knee, and jogged him up and down as hard as he could, crying: 'That's how Daddy will gallop next Sunday on the picnic!' And all day long the little fellow would sit astride on chairs and drag them round and round the room, shouting: 'I'm Daddy on his gee-gee!'

The maid herself regarded her master with undisguised admiration when she pictured him riding beside the carriage. At every meal she heard him enlarging on his feats of horsemanship as a boy at home; he had been well taught and with a horse between his legs he was afraid of nothing, absolutely nothing!

He kept saying to his wife, rubbing his hands: 'If they gave me rather an awkward animal I should be delighted! You'll see what a splendid seat I've got. If you like, we can come back by the Champs-Élysées, when everyone is returning from the Bois. We shall cut a bit of a dash and I shouldn't mind meeting someone from the Ministry. That's the way to gain the respect of one's chiefs.'

On the great day the carriage and the horse arrived together at the door and Hector dashed downstairs to inspect the animal. He

had had straps sewn on to his trouser-legs and he was flourishing a riding-whip bought the day before.

He raised and felt all four legs of his mount, one by one, stroked its neck, its flanks and its hocks, prodded its ribs, opened its mouth and examined its teeth to discover its age. When the family came down, he delivered a short lecture on the theoretical and practical aspects of horses in general and of this one in particular, pronouncing it a magnificent beast.

When the rest were all seated in the carriage, he tested the girth: then, putting his foot in the stirrup, he raised himself and let himself fall with a bump on to the saddle. The horse began to get restive under his weight and nearly unseated its rider.

This gave Hector a shock and he tried to calm the animal: 'Come, my beauty, don't play the fool!'

At last, when the horse quieted down and the rider regained his balance, he cried: 'Is everybody ready?'

There was a general shout of 'yes'. So he gave the order: 'Forward!' and the cavalcade moved off.

Every eye was fixed on him; he exaggerated his rising in the English fashion; hardly back in the saddle, he shot up again as if eager to take flight into space. He often looked as though he must fall forward on the horse's neck; he kept his eyes straight in front of him with a strained expression on his pale face.

His wife, with one child on her knee, and the maid with the other, kept repeating: 'Look at Daddy! Look at Daddy!'

And the two children, stimulated by the jolting, their natural excitement and the keen air, uttered shrill cries of pleasure. Finally, the horse, terrified by the noise, broke into a gallop and in his efforts to hold it the rider lost his hat. The coachman had to get down from the box to rescue the headgear, and, when he had handed it back to Hector, the latter shouted to his wife: 'Do stop the children screaming like that or you'll make the animal bolt.'

They lunched on the grass in Vésinet Wood on the food they had brought in hampers. Though the coachman took charge of the

horses, Hector was always getting up to see that his had everything it wanted; he patted its neck and gave it bread and cakes and sugar. He declared: 'It's a splendid trotter. Just at first it was all I could do to control it. But, as you saw, I soon recovered myself; it realized it had met its master and there will be no more trouble now.'

They returned according to plan by the Champs-Élysées.

The broad avenue was thronged with carriages. There were so many people walking along both sides that they looked like two long black ribbons stretching from the Arc de Triomphe to the Place de la Concorde. The sun was streaming down on this crowd, making the paint of the carriages, the steel of the harness and the door-handles flash and sparkle. The press of people, carriages and horses all seemed drunk with the movement and intoxication of life, and the Obelisk at the end rose up in a golden haze.

As soon as Hector's mount had passed the Arc de Triomphe, it seemed possessed by some spirit of mischief and made off at a smart trot in the direction of its stable, weaving in and out of the traffic, in spite of its rider's efforts to hold it in.

The carriage was left far behind. Suddenly, in front of the Palace of Industry the animal saw an opening, turned right and broke into a gallop.

An old woman in an apron was crossing the road slowly; she was right in Hector's path, as he approached at full tilt. Unable to check his steed, he started shouting at the top of his voice: 'Look out there! Look out for yourself!'

Possibly she was deaf; at any rate she went on placidly till she was struck by the horse's chest, now moving with the impetus of a steam-engine, and hurled ten yards with her skirts in the air after three somersaults. Voices shouted: 'Stop him!'

Hector, at his wits' end, clutching the mane, yelled: 'Help! Help!'

A frightful jerk shot him like a bullet over the horse's ears and landed him in the arms of a policeman, who had just come up from the opposite direction.

In no time a hostile crowd collected round him. One elderly gentleman in particular with a heavy white moustache, wearing a large red decoration, seemed furious and kept crying: 'Damn it! If a fellow's as incompetent as that, he'd better stay at home. When a man can't ride, he oughtn't to come out in the streets and kill people!'

Presently four men appeared carrying the woman; she was unconscious and her face was deathly pale with her bonnet askew and grey with dust. The old gentleman gave the order: 'Carry her to the nearest chemist and we'll go to the police station.'

Hector set off between two constables, while a third led the horse, followed by the crowd. At this moment the carriage drove up. His wife ran to him, while the maid had hysterics and the children howled. He explained that he would soon be home; he had knocked a woman over but there was nothing to worry about. So his distracted family drove on.

The proceedings at the police station were brief. He gave his name, Hector de Gribelin, employed at the Ministry of Marine. Then they waited for news of the injured woman. A policeman, sent to make enquiries, returned. She had recovered consciousness, but she had severe internal pains, she said. She was a charwoman, aged sixty-five, and her name was Madame Simon.

When he heard that she wasn't dead, Hector cheered up and promised to defray the expenses of treatment. After that he hurried to the chemist's.

There was a noisy crowd round the door. The old woman, collapsed on a chair, was groaning, her hands hanging limp and her face expressionless. Two doctors were still examining her; no bones were broken but they were afraid of internal injuries.

Hector questioned her: 'Are you in much pain?'

'Oh! yes, Sir!'

'Where do you feel the pain?'

'All my stomach seems on fire.'

A doctor approached: 'Are you the person responsible for the accident, Sir?'

'Yes, Doctor!'

'This woman must go to a nursing-home. I know one which will take her for six francs a day. Shall I make arrangements?'

Hector was delighted, thanked him, and went home much relieved.

His wife was waiting for him in tears. He soothed her. 'It's nothing to worry about. The Simon woman is better already, in three days she'll be as right as rain. I've sent her to a nursing-home - it's nothing.'

Nothing to worry about indeed!

When he got away from the office next day, he went to enquire after Madame Simon. He found her doing full justice to some meat broth. 'Well?' he asked.

She replied. 'It's no good, Sir, I'm no better. I'm all in, as you might say, and that's God's truth!'

The doctor said they could only wait - some complication might supervene.

After waiting three days he went again. The old woman, clear-eyed and looking the picture of health, began to groan as soon as she saw him. 'It's no good, I can't move, Sir! I shall be like this to the end of my days.'

Hector shivered. He asked to see the doctor, who shrugged his shoulders. 'What can I do, Sir? I don't know what to say. She screams when anyone tries to lift her. They can't even move her chair without her uttering piercing cries. I have to believe what she says. As long as I haven't seen her walk, I've no right to suspect her of lying.'

The old woman was listening, not moving, with a sly look on her face.

A week passed, then a fortnight, then a month. Madame Simon never left her armchair. She had a wonderful appetite and began to put on weight, chatting cheerfully with the other patients. She

seemed to regard sitting in her chair as a chance to rest, well earned by her fifty years of going up and down stairs, turning mattresses, carrying coals from one floor to another, sweeping and brushing.

Hector, now in despair, came every day; and every day he found her, serenely placid, declaring: 'I can't move, Sir, indeed I can't!'

Every evening Madame de Gribelin asked anxiously: 'How is Madame Simon?'

And every time he could only answer in hopeless dejection: 'There's absolutely no change!'

They got rid of the maid, whose wages they could no longer afford, and economized in every possible way. By now the whole bonus had gone. Then Hector called in four famous consultants to see the old woman. She let them examine her and poke and prod her about, with a knowing look in her eye.

'We must get her to walk,' said one.

She cried: 'I can't do it, Gentlemen, I really can't!'

However, they took hold of her, lifted her up and dragged her a few steps, but she slipped from their grasp and collapsed on the floor with such heartrending cries that they carried her back to her chair as gently as possible. They gave a carefully worded opinion which implied that she would never be able to work again.

When Hector broke this news to his wife she sank on to a chair and gasped: 'We'd better have her here – it would come cheaper.'

Hector started as if he had been shot: 'Here in our home! How can you suggest such a thing?'

But she answered, with tears in her eyes, resigned now to anything: 'Well, what can we do, my dear? After all it isn't my fault!'

LE HORLA

MAY 8TH. A perfect day! I spent all the morning lying on the grass in front of my house under the huge plane-tree, which casts its shade over the whole building. I love this part of the country and I love living here, because my roots are here, those deep sensitive roots which bind a man to the spot where his ancestors were born and died. The way people think there, the food they eat, their habits, the local dishes and expressions, the accent of the peasants, the tang of the soil, the smell of the villages, the very scent of the air itself go to form this bond.

I love this house where I grew up. From my windows I can see the Seine flowing past my garden on the other side of the road, almost part of my property, the deep broad river running from Rouen to Havre, thronged with boats passing.

To the left in the distance lies Rouen, a vast blue-roofed town nestling under a host of pointed Gothic spires. There are too many to count, some slender, some broad-based, all dominated by the cast-iron flèche of the cathedral; they all have their bells, which peal in the clear air on fine mornings, so that I hear the soft metallic hum in the distance and the ringing note of the bronze wafted on the breeze, now loud, now faint, as the wind rises and falls.

It was a gorgeous morning to-day.

About eleven o'clock a long line of ships passed in front of my garden-gate, towed by a tug no bigger than a fly, puffing painfully and spitting out a thick cloud of smoke.

Behind two English schooners, whose red ensign fluttered in the breeze, came a splendid Brazilian three-master, all white, beautifully clean and shining. I took off my hat to her, I don't know why; she was such a magnificent sight.

May 12th. For the last few days I've been a little feverish; I've not been feeling quite the thing, or rather I've been a bit depressed.

What is the origin of those mysterious influences which change our happiness into depression and our good spirits into anxiety? It is as if the atmosphere was full of unseen, unknown powers whose proximity affects us. I wake up on top of the world, wanting to sing; I wonder why. Then after a short stroll along the river I come back, convinced that some bad news is awaiting me at home. I can't understand it. Have I caught a chill which has upset my nerves and caused this depression? Is it the shape of the clouds or the ever-changing play of light on the landscape that has induced my black mood? I don't know. Everything round us, all that passes before our eyes unregistered, all that affects us unknowingly, all our subconscious contacts, all that we see without perceiving has an immediate, surprising, unaccountable effect on us, on our physical organs, and through them on our minds and even on the heart itself.

The mystery of the invisible is quite incomprehensible; we cannot fathom it with our poor weak senses – our eyes which cannot distinguish either the infinitely small or the infinitely large, either the too near or the too distant, the denizens of a star or of a drop of water – or our ears which deceive us by transmitting sound-waves as musical notes. Our ears are magicians which perform the miracle of changing these waves into sound and so give birth to music, making harmony out of nature's meaningless flux. Our sense of smell is less keen than that of a dog and our palate can hardly recognize the age of a wine.

If only we had other organs to perform other miracles for us, how much more we could discover in the world around us!

May 16. I'm definitely ill and last month I was so well! I've got a temperature or rather some feverish nerve complaint, which affects me mentally as much as physically. I can't get rid of this horrible sensation of impending danger, this anticipation of some imminent misfortune or approaching death, a presentiment which is the symptom of some unknown disease developing in the bloodstream and the body.

May 18th. I've just been to see my doctor, for I can't get any sleep. He found my pulse rapid, my eye dilated and my nerves on edge, but nothing to worry about. He prescribed shower-baths and a dose of potassium bromide.

May 25th. No change! My condition is certainly very disturbing. As evening approaches, an unaccountable anxiety seizes me, as if the darkness hid some terrible threat to my life. I hurry over my dinner and try to read, but I don't understand the words and I can hardly read the letters. Then I pace up and down my sitting-room, oppressed by a vague overmastering fear, fear of going to bed and sleeping.

About two in the morning I go to my bedroom and as soon as I get there I double-lock the door and bolt it. . . . I'm terrified of something, I don't know what; I've never been nervous before. I open my cupboards and look under the bed - I listen and listen - for what? Isn't it strange that a little discomfort, perhaps something wrong with my circulation, a slight congestion, some quite trivial upset in the defective, delicate working of our physical mechanism has the power to turn the most cheerful of men into a melancholic, the bravest into a coward? Soon I get into bed and wait for sleep as one would wait for the hangman. I wait for sleep in a state of terror, my heart thumping and my limbs twitching. I shiver all over in spite of the warmth of the bed-clothes, till suddenly I fall asleep like a man plunging into a stagnant pool to drown himself. I am not conscious of the approach of sleep as I used to be; it is now a treacherous foe lurking near me, ready to pounce on me, close my eyes, and destroy me.

I sleep for some time, two or three hours; then a dream or rather a nightmare seizes me. I know quite well that I am in bed and asleep - I realize it and I can see myself; and I am conscious, too, of someone approaching me, looking at me, touching me; next he climbs on to the bed, kneels on my chest, seizes my throat and grips it with all his strength to strangle me.

I struggle, paralysed by the ghastly impotence which affects one

in a dream; I try to scream but I can't; I try with all my might, panting with the effort, to turn over and throw off the being who is crushing and suffocating me – and I am powerless.

Suddenly I wake up in panic terror, dripping with sweat, and light a candle; there is no one there.

After this struggle, which is repeated every night, I go to sleep at last and sleep peacefully till morning.

June 2nd. My condition is worse. What is the matter with me? The bromide and the baths are doing no good. To-day, exhausted as I was already, I went for a walk in the Forest of Roumare to tire myself out. I thought at first that the fresh air, so soft and cool, full of the scent of grass and leaves, was invigorating my blood and stimulating my heart. I chose a broad hunters' drive and presently turned towards La Bouille by a narrow track bordered by two rows of huge trees, which interposed a thick dark-green roof between me and the sky.

Suddenly I shivered; it was not the shiver caused by cold but the shiver of fright.

I quickened my pace, nervous at being alone in the wood, irrationally, foolishly terrified by the absolute solitude. I felt I was being followed, that someone was walking close behind me, touching me.

I swung round sharply but I was alone. Behind me I saw nothing but the broad straight drive, empty and towering, and in front too it stretched as far as I could see, frighteningly empty.

I closed my eyes, I don't know why, and began to spin round and round on one heel like a top; I nearly fell down. When I opened my eyes again, the trees were dancing and the ground heaving; I had to sit down. Then I forgot which way I had come – I lost my head completely and hadn't an idea. I started off to the right and found myself back in the drive which had brought me to the middle of the forest.

June 3rd. I've had a dreadful night! I'm going away for a week or two. A little trip will no doubt do me good.

July 2nd. I'm home again, cured! Moreover I've had a delightful holiday; I went to Mont-Saint-Michel, which I didn't know.

What a marvellous view it is, when one arrives at Avranches, as I did, towards evening! The town is on a hill and I drove to the public garden on the edge of the city. I uttered a cry of amazement. There in front of me as far as I could see stretched an immensely wide bay; its widely separated coasts disappeared in the misty distance. In the centre of this vast bay, which reflected the gold of a cloudless sky, rose the dark point of a strange rock, surrounded by the sands. The sun had just set and against the sky, still crimson, was silhouetted the outline of this fantastic rock crowned with its fantastic abbey.

Early next morning I walked towards it. The tide was out as it had been the evening before and, as I got nearer, I saw the astonishing building rearing up before me. After more than an hour's walk I reached the huge rock mass, on which stands the little town dominated by the great church. I climbed the steep narrow street and entered the most perfect Gothic abode ever designed for God on earth, a whole town in itself, full of low halls crushed beneath vaulted ceilings and lofty galleries supported on slender columns. I made my way into this immense granite jewel, airy as lace with its crown of towers and slim spires with winding stairs inside. These thrust up into the clear sky by day and the dark sky by night, their strange heads bristling with devils and gargoyles, fantastic animals and monstrous flowers, joined to each other by delicate carved arches.

When I reached the top, I said to the monk who was showing me round. 'You must be very happy here, Father!'

He answered: 'It's very windy, Sir.' We began to talk, as we watched the tide rising, racing across the sands and covering them as with a steel breastplate. The monk told me an endless series of old stories and legends of the place.

One of these impressed me greatly. Local people living on the rock insist that a voice can be heard at night on the sands, followed

by the bleating of two goats, one loud and one faint. Sceptics assert that it is only the cry of sea-birds, which sometimes sounds like bleating, sometimes like human lamentations. But fishermen coming home late swear that they have met an old shepherd, wandering over the dunes between two tides round the isolated little town; his head is always hidden by his cloak and he walks in front leading a he-goat with a man's head and a nanny with a woman's, both have long white hair and talk all the time, abusing each other in an unknown tongue and then suddenly pausing to bleat with all their might.

I said to the monk 'Do you believe this?'

He replied in a low voice 'I don't know.'

I went on 'If there existed on earth beings other than ourselves, surely we must have discovered them long ago; you and I must have seen them.'

He answered 'Can we see the hundred-thousandth part of what exists? Take the wind, for example, the most powerful force in nature, it blows men over, destroys houses, uproots trees, raises the sea into mountainous waves, undermines cliffs, and drives great ships on to reefs, it kills, whistles, moans, roars. Have you ever seen it? Can you ever see it? But it exists all the same.'

I had no answer to this obvious argument, the man was a philosopher — or was he only unsophisticated? I wasn't quite sure which, but I fell silent, the same thought had often occurred to me.

July 3rd. I slept badly. There is certainly something here, which makes me feverish, for my coachman suffers from the same trouble. When I got home yesterday, I noticed him looking pale and I asked 'What is the matter with you, John?'

'The fact is I can't sleep, Sir, it's the nights that get me down. Since you went away, Sir, there's been some sort of spell on me.'

The other servants, however, are perfectly well, but I'm afraid of another attack myself.

July 4th. I'm certainly worse again. My old nightmares are back. Last night I felt as if someone was lying on top of me, with his

mouth on mine, draining my life away through my lips. Yes, he was sucking my life from my mouth like a leech. Presently he got up satiated and I woke up so bruised, so exhausted, so worn out that I couldn't move. Another day or two of this and I shall have to go away again.

July 5th. Is my reason going? What happened last night is so inexplicable that my brain is in a whirl when I think of it.

I had locked my bedroom door, as I do now every night; then, feeling thirsty, I drank half a tumbler of water and I happened to notice that my water-bottle was full right up to the stopper.

After that I went to bed and fell into one of my ghastly trances, out of which I was awoken some two hours later by a still more terrifying shock.

Imagine a man being murdered in his sleep, waking up with a knife in his lungs and the death-rattle in his throat, covered with blood, fighting for breath, at his last gasp, not knowing what has happened — well, I was like that.

Having at last recovered myself, I felt thirsty again, so I lit my candle and went to the table where my water-bottle stood. I picked it up and tilted it to fill my glass; no water came, it was empty, absolutely empty! At first I didn't understand; then I suddenly realized with such a shock that I had to sit down, or rather I collapsed on to a chair! A minute later I started up and looked all round, but immediately sat down again, dazed with amazement and terror in front of the empty bottle. I gazed fixedly at it, searching for some explanation. My hands were shaking. Someone had drunk the water! Who? It must have been me, of course; it could have been no one else! So I must be a sleep-walker; without knowing it, I must be living this mysterious double life, which makes us wonder if there are two personalities in us or if some alien being, unknown and invisible, enters into us, while we are unconscious, and controls our body, which must obey the intruder as it obeys us or even more implicitly.

No one can realize my ghastly agony of mind; no one can

imagine the feelings of a man, perfectly sane and wide awake, in possession of all his faculties, gazing in panic terror at an empty water-bottle, from which a little water has disappeared, while he was asleep. I stayed there till dawn, not daring to go back to bed.

July 6th. I am going mad! Someone has emptied my water-bottle again to-night – or rather I must have drunk it myself. But is it really I, is it? Who else could it be? My God! I'm going mad – no one can save me!

July 10th. I've just carried out several experiments with astonishing results. I must be mad – or am I?

On July 6th, before going to bed, I put on my table wine, milk, water, bread, and some strawberries. Someone – that is, I – drank all the water and some of the milk; neither the wine nor the strawberries were touched.

On July 7th I tried the same experiment with the same result.

On July 8th I omitted the water and the milk, and nothing was touched.

Finally, on July 9th I put on my table only water and milk, carefully wrapping the bottles in white muslin and tying down the stoppers. Then I rubbed my lips, my beard and my hands with black lead and went to bed.

I fell into a deep sleep, followed presently by an agonizing awakening. I hadn't stirred; there was no black mark on my sheets. I hurried to the table. The wrappings round the bottles were not stained. I untied the string round the stoppers. All the water and all the milk had been drunk. Oh! my God!

I'm just starting for Paris.

July 12th. Paris. I must have been crazy these last few days! I must have been the victim of an overwrought imagination, unless I've been walking in my sleep or under the influence, observed but never explained, called suggestion. Anyhow my panic terror came very close to madness and twenty-four hours in Paris have been enough to put me right. Yesterday, after some shopping and a round of visits, which brought a breath of fresh air into my mind,

I finished up the evening at the Comédie-Française. They were playing a piece by the younger Alexandre Dumas and his sprightly penetrating wit has completed my cure. It is certainly dangerous for those engaged in brain work to live alone; we need the society of people who think and talk. Alone for a long period, we fill the void with fantasies.

I made my way back to my hotel along the boulevards. In the midst of the bustling crowd I smiled at my last week's terrors and imaginations, when I had seriously believed that an invisible being was installed in my house. We are poor weak creatures, easily frightened and upset, when we have to face some trivial incident which we cannot explain.

Instead of drawing the obvious inference: 'I can't understand this, because I don't know its cause,' we immediately imagine some terrifying mystery or supernatural power at work.

July 14th. The Festival of the Republic. I've been walking about the streets, where the crackers and flags afforded me childish amusement. All the same it's pretty futile to cultivate the holiday spirit on a fixed date by Government decree. The masses are like a flock of unintelligent sheep, sometimes stupidly patient, sometimes fiercely undisciplined. The order is given: 'Amuse yourselves,' and they obey; next they are told: 'Go and fight your neighbour,' and again they obey. They are bidden to vote for the Emperor, and they vote for him; the next order is: 'Vote for the Republic,' and they do so.

Those who control them are equally foolish; but instead of obeying a human master, they are the slaves of principles, which must of necessity be senseless, sterile, and false, just because they are principles, that is, ideas held to be established and immutable in a world where nothing is certain — light and sound themselves are only illusions.

July 16th. I had an experience yesterday, which has upset me considerably.

I was dining at the house of my cousin, Madame Sablé, whose

husband is in command of the 76th Light Infantry at Limoges. There were two other young married women at dinner, one the wife of a Dr Parent, a specialist on nervous complaints, who has devoted much attention to the extraordinary development of recent experiment in hypnotism and suggestion.

He gave us a long account of the amazing results obtained by English scientists and doctors of the Nancy school. What he asserted to be facts seemed to me so inexplicable that I roundly declared I didn't believe them.

'We are,' he insisted, 'on the eve of the discovery of one of nature's most important secrets, I mean, one of the most important for this world of ours; for she holds others, no doubt, equally important for the bodies in space. Ever since man has been able to think and express his thoughts in speech and writing, he has been aware of the close proximity of a mystery, which eludes his gross imperfect senses, and he has been trying to make up for the impotence of his physical organs by exercising his intelligence. While human intelligence was rudimentary, these unseen phenomena which haunted him merely produced commonplace terror. Thus is the origin of popular beliefs in the supernatural, stories of prowling spirits, fairies, gnomes, and ghosts.'

'But since rather more than a century ago there have been hints of something new. Mesmer and a few others have blazed an unexpected trail and we have, especially in the last four or five years, reached amazing results.'

My cousin, who was as incredulous as I, smiled. Dr Parent said to her: 'Would you like me to try to put you to sleep, Madame?'

'Yes, I'm quite willing.'

She sat down in an armchair and he began to fix her with a fascinating gaze. I was suddenly conscious of a vague feeling of uneasiness; my heart thumped and my throat contracted. I saw Madame Sablé's eyes close; her mouth twitched and her breast heaved.

In ten minutes she was asleep.

'Go behind her,' said the doctor to me.

I took a seat behind her and he placed a visiting-card in her hand, saying: 'This is a looking-glass; what do you see in it?'

She replied: 'I see my cousin.'

'What is he doing?'

'He is curling his moustache.'

'And now what?'

'He is taking a photograph out of his pocket.'

'Whom is the photograph of?'

'Himself.'

She was right! And the photograph had only been delivered to me at my hotel that evening.

'What does he look like in the photograph?'

'He is standing up with his hat in his hand.'

So she could see in this card, this piece of white pasteboard, what she would have seen in a mirror.

The young women were frightened and cried. 'That's enough; stop!'

But the doctor gave her the order. 'You will get up at eight o'clock to-morrow morning and go to your cousin at his hotel; you will ask him for the loan of five thousand francs, which your husband has asked you for and which he will want from you, when he comes to-morrow.'

He then woke her up

On my way back to my hotel I was thinking over this curious seance and I began to feel doubts, not indeed about my cousin's good faith, which was certain and entirely above suspicion – I had known her like a sister from childhood – but about a possible deception on the part of the doctor. Could he have been concealing in his hand a mirror, which he showed to the sleeping lady at the same time as the visiting-card? Professional conjurors do equally wonderful things.

I got back to the hotel and went to bed.

This morning about half past eight I was woken by my valet,

who said: 'Madame Sablé is here and wants to speak to you urgently, Sir.' I hurried into my clothes and had her in.

She sat down in a great state of agitation, keeping her eyes on the ground, and said without raising her veil: 'My dear cousin, I've got a great favour to ask you.'

'What is it, my dear?'

'I hate asking you but I can't help it. I want, and I simply must have, five thousand francs.'

'You can't mean it!'

'Yes, I do, or rather my husband does, and he has asked me to get it.'

I was so dumbfounded that I couldn't speak without stammering. I wondered if she wasn't in collusion with Dr Parent to pull my leg, if the whole thing was not a practical joke, carefully rehearsed and well carried out. But all my doubts disappeared, as I watched her more closely. She was trembling with anxiety, the request was so painful to her, and I realized she was on the verge of tears. I knew she was not hard up and I went on: 'Do you really mean he cannot put his hand on five thousand francs? Think a minute. Are you sure he wanted you to ask me for the money?'

She hesitated for a few seconds as if making a great effort to remember, before she replied: 'Yes . . . yes! I'm quite sure.'

'Did he write to you?'

She hesitated again, pondering. I guessed the agony of her thoughts. She didn't know; she only knew that she had got to borrow five thousand francs from me for her husband. She steeled herself to tell a lie. 'Yes, I had a letter from him.'

'When? You didn't mention it yesterday.'

'I only got the letter this morning.'

'Could you show it to me?'

'No, I couldn't. . . It was an intimate personal letter. Beside . . . I've . . . I've burnt it.'

'Your husband must have run into debt then.'

She hesitated again, before saying in a low voice: 'I don't know'

I said brutally 'The facts, I can't lay my hand on five thousand francs at the moment, my dear cousin.'

She uttered an agonized cry 'Oh! please, please, you must find them!'

She was working herself up into a state of violent excitement – she clasped her hands in an attitude of prayer. The tone of her voice changed, she was sobbing and stammering, tortured and dominated by the peremptory command she had received

'Oh! I beg and beseech you – if you only knew what a state I'm in – I simply must have the money to-day!'

I took pity on her 'You shall have it as soon as I can get it, I promise.'

'Oh! thank you! It is good of you!'

I went on 'Do you recollect what happened at your house yesterday?'

'Yes!'

'Do you remember Dr Parent putting you to sleep?'

'Yes!'

'Well, he told you to come and borrow five thousand francs from me this morning, and you are obeying his suggestion at this moment.'

She thought for a minute and then replied 'But it's my husband who wants them.'

For an hour I tried to convince her but without success. When she had gone, I hurried to the doctor's house, he was just going out. After listening to me with a smile, he said 'Are you convinced now?'

'I can't help it.'

'Let's go to your cousin's house.'

She was already dozing in a deck chair, dead beat. The doctor felt her pulse and fixed his gaze on her for some minutes, raising one hand towards her eyes, which gradually closed under the over-mastering influence of this magnetic force.

When she was asleep, the doctor said: 'Your husband doesn't need the five thousand francs after all. So you will forget that you ever asked your cousin for the loan, and if he mentions the subject, you will not understand.'

After that he woke her up. I took my wallet out of my pocket: 'Here is what you asked for this morning, my dear cousin!'

She was so taken aback that I dared not press the matter. I tried to recall it to her mind but she vehemently denied it; she thought I was making fun of her and finally nearly got seriously annoyed.

*

Well, that's that! I'm back at the hotel, so upset that I couldn't eat any lunch.

July 19th. I've told the story to several people and they all laughed at me. I don't know what to think. A wise man doesn't commit himself.

July 20th. I've been to dine at Bougival and I spent the evening at the Boat Club's dance. Everything obviously depends on one's surroundings. It would be the height of folly to believe in the supernatural on the Île de la Grenouillère, but at the top of the Mont Saint-Michel or in the Indies it's quite another thing. The influence of one's surroundings is frighteningly powerful. I shall go home next week.

July 30th. I got home yesterday. Everything is all right.

August 2nd. Nothing to report. The weather is gorgeous. I spend my time watching the Seine flowing past.

August 4th. Trouble among the servants. They assert that glasses are getting broken in the cupboards. The valet accuses the kitchenmaid, who in turn accuses the sewing-maid, who accuses the other two. Who is responsible? It would take a Solomon to decide!

August 6th. This time I'm not mad; I've got the evidence of my own eyes . . . I've seen . . . yes, I've seen . . . there's no longer any question, I've seen!

At two o'clock I was walking in my rose-garden in the blazing sun . . . under a pergola of autumn roses just coming into bloom.

As I paused to look at a bush of *Géant des Batailles* with three splendid blooms on it, I saw distinctly, quite close to me, the stem of one of the roses curve, as if an unseen hand had bent it; then it broke as if the hand had picked it. After that the flower rose in the air, following the curve which an arm would have described in raising it to the nose. There it remained suspended in the air all by itself, a terrifying splash of red not three yards from my eyes.

I made a desperate leap to seize it but there was nothing there; it had disappeared. This made me furious with myself, a rational sane man has no right to have hallucinations of this kind.

But was it really an hallucination? I turned to look for the stem and found it at once without difficulty, freshly broken off, between the two other roses still on the branch.

I went back to the house thoroughly upset, for I am now certain, as certain as that night follows day, that there is close to me an invisible being of some sort, who lives on milk and water, who can touch, handle, and move things; this means that he has a material body, though not perceptible to our senses, and that he lives in the house with me.

August 7th. I had a peaceful night. He drank the water in my bottle but did not disturb my sleep. I wonder if I am mad. As I was walking along the river just now in the bright sun, I began to doubt my sanity, it was not a vague uncertainty, such as I have felt recently, but a definite positive doubt. I have seen lunatics; I have known several, who remained intelligent, lucid, and perfectly rational on everything in life except one point. They talked quite sensibly, fluently, penetratingly, and then suddenly their brain would run on the reef of their madness, collapse, split asunder, and sink in the raging, terrifying sea of their insanity with its breakers, fogs, and squalls.

I should certainly consider myself mad, if I were not perfectly clear in the head and fully conscious of my condition, if I were not

continually probing and analysing it with complete lucidity. In fact, I must be the rational victim of an hallucination. Some mysterious disturbance must be working in my brain, one of those which physiologists to-day are trying to trace and define. This disturbance must have produced a deep fissure in my mind and in the logical processes of my thought. Phenomena of this kind occur in dreams, in which we are not surprised at the most wildly fantastic happenings, because our critical faculty and power of objective examination are dormant, while the imaginative mechanism is awake and active. It is conceivable that one of the hidden notes on the keyboard of my brain is out of action. As the result of an accident some men lose the power of remembering proper names or figures or merely dates. It is an established fact that all the organs of thought are localized in different cells of the brain; it is therefore not surprising that my ability to control the absurdity of certain hallucinations should for the time being be in abeyance.

These thoughts were running in my head as I walked by the riverside. The stream was shining in the sun and all the earth seemed to smile. As I looked at the scene around me, my heart overflowed with love for everything that has life, for the swallows whose speed of movement is a joy to the eye and for the rushes on the bank, whose rustling is music to the ear.

Gradually, however, an unaccountable uneasiness swept over me. Some indefinable influence seemed to be sapping my energy and will-power; I felt I could not go on and must return. I was conscious with an urgency that was positively painful that I must go home, the kind of feeling one has, when one has left the bedside of a dear friend and suddenly has a presentiment that he has got worse.

So I turned back unwillingly, sure that, when I got home, I should find some bad news, a letter or a telegram; but there was nothing. I was more disturbed and surprised than if I had had some new fantastic experience.

August 8th. I had a dreadful evening yesterday. Now there is no

manifestation of his presence but I am conscious of him quite close, spying on me, watching, possessing, dominating me. When he conceals himself like this, I fear him more than when supernatural phenomena reveal his invisible constant presence. But my sleep has not been disturbed.

August 9th. Nothing to report, but I'm terrified.

August 10th. Still nothing. What will happen to-morrow?

August 11th. Again nothing; but I can't stay in the house with this haunting fear and these torturing thoughts. I shall go away.

August 12th. 10 p.m. All day I've been trying to go away but I couldn't. I wanted to exercise my freedom of action and do this easy simple thing—go out, get into my carriage and drive to Rouen — and I couldn't do it. Why?

August 13th. Certain diseases seem to cause a breakdown in the physical mechanism of the body; our energies flag, our muscles relax, our bones become soft like flesh and our flesh is as water. That is my mental condition at this moment, a state of unaccountable depression. I have no strength, no courage; I'm not my own master, I have no will-power; I can't even make up my own mind, someone makes it up for me and I merely obey.

August 14th. I'm finished! I'm possessed, under some alien control; yes, that is literally true. Someone dictates my every act, my every movement, my every thought. I count for nothing, I just look on like a trembling slave at what I do. I want to go out and I just can't — *he* won't let me; so I stay where I am, helpless, shaking, in the armchair, where he keeps me sitting. I only want to get up in order to prove that I can; but I can't do it — I'm riveted to my seat and my chair is clamped to the floor, so that no power on earth could raise us. Then suddenly I feel I simply must go out into the garden and pick some strawberries and eat them. O my God, my God! Is there a God? If there is a God, let him set me free and deliver me from this torment! O God, grant me pardon and grace! Pity me, save me! I'm suffering the pains of Hell — oh! the horror of it all!

August 15th. My poor cousin must, I'm sure, have been subjected to this kind of possession and outside domination, when she came to borrow the five thousand francs from me. She was under the control of some alien power that had entered into her, some external alien tyrant. Does it portend the end of the world? What is the nature of this controlling power, invisible, inexplicable, this supernatural intruder who is my master?

So invisible beings do exist! How is it that since the beginning of the world they have never before shown themselves in this unmistakable way? I have never read of any occurrence similar to the manifestations in my house. If only I could leave the house, go away and never return, it would be my salvation! But I can't do it.

August 16th. To-day I managed to escape for two hours, like a prisoner who finds the door of his cell accidentally left unlocked. I suddenly felt I was free, that he had gone away. I ordered my carriage at once and drove to Rouen. It was pure joy to be able to give the order 'To Rouen!' and be obeyed.

I stopped in front of the Library and asked for the loan of Dr Hermann Herestauss' great work on the unknown inhabitants of the ancient and modern world. Then, as I got into my carriage, I meant to say 'To the station!' but instead I shouted – I did not speak in my usual voice, I shouted so loud that the passers-by turned round – 'Home!' and sank back on the seat in an agony of terror. He had found me and resumed his control.

August 17th. I've had a ghastly night but I really ought to be glad. I read till one o'clock. Hermann Herestauss, Doctor of Philosophy and Cosmology, gives an account of the manifestations of all the unseen beings who prowl round mankind or have been imagined in dreams. He describes their origin, their sphere of influence, and their power. But none of them is at all like the being who haunts me. It would seem that man, ever since he has had the power of thought, has had a terrified presentiment of some new being, stronger than himself, who is destined to replace him in the world; feeling him close and unable to guess the nature of this master, in

his panic terror he has imagined a whole fantastic race of occult presences, vague phantoms born of his fear.

Well, after reading till one in the morning, I went and sat by my open window to cool my forehead and brain in the gentle night breeze. It was fine and warm. How I should have loved that night in the old days!

There was no moon. The stars were twinkling and winking against the dark back-cloth of the sky. Who lives in those other worlds? What shapes, what creatures, what animals, what plants exist there? Perhaps the thinkers in those distant worlds have wider knowledge and greater powers than we. Can they see things of which we know nothing? Will one of them some day or other make his way through space and appear in our world to conquer it, as the Normans crossed the sea in old days to enslave weaker races?

We are so feeble, so defenceless, so ignorant, we human pygmies, who inhabit this ball of mud set in the oceans!

I dropped off to sleep in the cool evening breeze with these thoughts running in my head. After I had been asleep for about forty minutes, I opened my eyes again without moving, woken up by a vague feeling of uneasiness. At first I noticed nothing; but suddenly I saw a page of the book, which lay open on the table, turn of itself. Not a breath of air was coming in by the window. Dumbfounded, I waited. About four minutes later I saw – yes, I saw with my own eyes – another page rise and fall back on the previous page, as if a finger had turned it. My armchair was empty – or seemed so – but I knew *he* was there, sitting in my place, reading. With one wild leap, the leap of a furious beast eager to tear his trainer to pieces, I was across the room, mad to seize him and crush him to death. But, before I could reach my chair, it was knocked over backwards as if someone had tried to escape from me; the table rocked, the lamp fell to the ground and went out, and my window banged to, as if a burglar, surprised, had disappeared into the darkness, slamming the shutters behind him.

He had run away! He had actually been afraid of me! In that

case . . . to-morrow or the day after or some day . . . I shall succeed in getting hold of him and bearing him to the ground. Even dogs sometimes go for their masters and seize them by the throat.

August 18th. I've been thinking all day. Yes! I'll obey him, do as he wills, carry out his orders, behave like a humble, submissive coward. He is stronger than I am but my time will come.

August 19th. Now I know, I know the whole story. I've just read this in the *Science Review*: 'An unusual piece of news comes to us from Rio de Janeiro. An epidemic of insanity, like the infectious attacks of madness which affected Europe in the Middle Ages, is raging at this moment in the Province of Sao Paulo. The victims leave their homes, deserting their villages and abandoning their fields; they assert that they are pursued, possessed, driven like cattle by beings who are invisible but can be felt, like vampires who drain their vitality in their sleep and drink water and milk without apparently touching any other kind of food.

'Professor Don Pedro Henriquez, accompanied by several medical experts, has started for the Province of Sao Paulo, in order to study on the spot the origin and symptoms of this strange epidemic and suggest to the Emperor such measures as may seem suitable to restore those affected to sanity.'

Now I remember quite well that lovely Brazilian three-master, which passed under my windows on her way up the Seine on May 8th last. I thought it such a beautiful ship, so white and cheerful. This being was on board on his way from South America, where his like originate. And he caught sight of me! He noticed my house, which was as white as his ship, and he leapt ashore. Oh! my God!

Now I know, I can guess the truth. Man's dominion is a thing of the past! *He* has come, the being who was an object of fear to primitive races, whom anxious priests tried to exorcize, whom sorcerers called up at midnight without ever yet seeing him in visible form, to whom the temporary lords of creation attributed

in imagination the shape, monstrous or attractive, of gnomes, spirits, fairies or goblins. After the vulgar ideas inspired by prehistoric fears, scientific research has clarified the outlines of man's presentiment. Mesmer guessed it and in the last ten years doctors have discovered the exact nature of this being's power before its manifestation. They have experimented with this weapon of the new lord of the world, the imposition of a dominant will on the human soul, which thus becomes its slave. To this power they have given the name of magnetism, hypnotism, suggestion, and what not. I have seen them playing with it like silly children playing with fire. Woe to us! Woe to mankind! He has come . . . what is his name? . . . He seems to be shouting it aloud, but I can't catch it . . . yes, he is shouting it and I can't hear . . . say it again! . . . Le Horla, I've got it at last . . . Le Horla . . . that's his name . . . Le Horla has come!

The eagle has killed the dove, the wolf has eaten the sheep, the lion has devoured the horned aurochs; man has slain the lion with arrow, sword or gunpowder. But Le Horla is destined to make of man what man has made of horse and bullock, his chattel, his servant and his food, by the mere power of his will. Woe to mankind!

Nevertheless the beast sometimes revolts and destroys his tamer . . . that is my task. I shall succeed but first I must recognize him, touch him, see him! Experts say that an animal's eye differs from ours and cannot distinguish as we can; similarly my human sight cannot distinguish the new being dominating me.

Why is this? Ah! now I recall what the monk at Mont-Saint-Michel said: 'Can we see the hundred-thousandth part of what exists? Take the wind, for example, the most powerful force in nature; it blows men over, destroys houses, uproots trees, raises the sea into mountainous waves, undermines cliffs, drives great ships on to reefs. The wind kills, whistles, moans, roars. Have you ever seen it? Can you ever see it? But it exists all the same!'

I pursued this line of thought; my eye is so inefficient, so imperfect, that it cannot distinguish even a solid body, if it is transparent

like glass. If an unsilvered glass bars my path, my eye allows me to dash myself against it, as a bird in a room dashes itself against the window pane; and there are many other things that deceive the eye and lead it astray. So it is in no way surprising that it should be unable to discern a strange body, through which light can pass.

A new being! Why not? Something of this sort was surely bound to come. Why should man be the last word? We cannot see this being as we can all the previous results of evolution. True, and the reason is that its nature is more perfect, its body finer and more finished than ours. We are so feeble, so clumsily made; we are hampered by organs easily tired and often strained like over-complicated springs. The human body lives like a plant or an animal, laboriously drawing nourishment from the air and from vegetable and animal matter, a living mechanism subject to disease, mutilation, and decay, short of breath, badly controlled, easily deceived, unreliable; it is poorly though ingeniously constructed, a piece of work at once coarse and delicate, a blue print for a being capable of developing into something noble and intelligent.

There are so few of us on the earth, even if we include all forms of animal life from the crustacea to man. Why should there not be a new form of life, once the period necessary for the evolution of a new species has elapsed?

Why not one more? Why not also a new type of tree, with immense blossoms, brilliantly coloured, scenting a whole country? Why not other elements besides earth, air, fire, and water? There are four, only four of them, from which mankind draws its sustenance. What a pitifully small number! Why not forty, four hundred, four thousand? How poor, mean, wretched everything is! Grudgingly given, poorly designed, clumsily built! Could there be anything more ungainly than an elephant or a hippopotamus, more awkward than a camel?

But look at the butterfly, you will say, a very flower with wings! Why, I can envisage one as big as a hundred globes, whose wings have a form, a beauty, a sheen, a movement that defy imagination.

I can picture it, winging its way from star to star, refreshing and scenting everything with the gentle rhythmic breath of its passage. I can see the denizens of space watching its flight in ecstasy and delight.

*

What is the matter with me? It must be Le Horla, haunting me, putting these wild ideas into my head; he is in me, possessing my soul. I must kill him!

August 19th. I *shall* kill him. I've seen him! Yesterday evening I was sitting at my table, pretending to concentrate on writing. I knew he would come prowling round, quite close, so close that I should be able to touch and perhaps seize him. And then I should have the strength of despair; I should use my hands, knees, chest, head, teeth, to strangle, crush, bite, tear him to pieces.

I watched for him, all my senses at full stretch.

I had lit my two lamps and the eight candles on my chimney-piece, as if the illumination would help me to detect him.

Facing me stood my bed, an old oak four-poster; on my right was the chimney-piece, on my left the door, carefully shut – I had left it open for some time in order to entice him in. Behind me was a tall cupboard with a mirror, which I use every day for shaving and dressing; I always look at myself from head to foot every time I pass it.

To deceive him, I pretended to write, for he was watching me too. Suddenly I felt, I was quite certain, he was reading over my shoulder, almost touching me.

I leapt to my feet with hands outstretched and swung round so quickly that I nearly fell. It was as light as day and yet I could not see myself in the glass! It was blank, unshadowed, dim, like deep water but luminous. But there was no reflection of me, though I was straight in front of it. I saw the great mirror-glass clear from top to bottom. I gazed in terror, not daring to advance or move; I knew he was there, but that he would escape me again, this being whose invisible body had absorbed my reflection.

I was dumbfounded. Then suddenly I began to see myself mistily in the glass, as one sees an object dimly through water; and the water seemed to be shifting slowly from left to right, and my reflection was clearing from second to second. It was like the end of an eclipse. Whatever was obscuring my image seemed to possess no clear-cut outline but was a kind of opaque transparency, gradually clearing.

At last I could distinguish myself completely as usual in the glass.

I have seen him! The terror of it is still upon me and I am trembling all over.

August 20th. How am I going to kill him, as I can't get hold of him? Poison? But he would see me putting it into the water. Besides, would our poisons have any effect on his invisible body? No, I'm sure they would not. What can I do then?

August 21st. I've sent for a locksmith from Rouen and ordered iron shutters for my bedroom, the kind of thing that some flats in Paris have on the ground floor for fear of thieves. He will make me an iron door too. I pretended to be highly nervous but I don't care what he thinks of me.

*

September 10th. Rouen: Hôtel Continental. I've done it . . . I've done it . . . but is he dead? It was a ghastly sight!

Yesterday the locksmith finished my iron shutters and door; so I left everything open till midnight, though it was beginning to get chilly.

Suddenly I was aware with a feeling of wild triumph that he was there. I got up slowly and walked up and down for some time, so that he shouldn't become suspicious. Then I took off my boots and thrust my feet carelessly into my slippers; next I closed the shutters and strolled casually to the door and double-locked it. After that I went back to the window and padlocked it, slipping the key into my pocket.

All at once I felt he was moving about round me, that he was afraid and was willing me to open the room. I very nearly yielded

but I didn't quite; and backing to the door, I opened it a crack, just sufficiently to let me out backwards. I am tall, and my head reached to the lintel. I was sure he could not have got out and I shut him in by himself. Triumph! I had got him at last! Then I ran downstairs to my drawing-room, which was immediately under my bedroom, and seized my two lamps, spilling the oil on the carpet, the furniture, everywhere. After that I set fire to it and made my escape, double-locking the heavy front door.

I ran and hid in a clump of laurels at the far end of the garden. I waited for what seemed an age; everything was dark and silent, not a movement, not a breath of air, not a star visible; overhead masses of cloud, which I could not see but which weighed, oh! so heavily, on my consciousness.

I kept my eyes on the house, waiting. How long it seemed! I began to think that the fire must have gone out by itself or that he had put it out, when one of the downstairs windows blew out under the pressure of the heat and a great tongue of flame, red and yellow, ran up the white wall to the roof, gently enfolding it in a fiery embrace. The trees, the branches, and the leaves were suddenly lit up and seemed to shiver with fear. The birds woke up and a dog began to bark; it looked like dawn. Two other windows blew out and I could see that the whole ground floor of my house was a raging fiery furnace. But a cry, a woman's horrible shrill shriek, rang out in the night and two windows on the top floor were flung open. I had forgotten the servants; I could see their panic-stricken faces and their waving arms. Then, mad with horror, I began to run towards the village, screaming: 'Help! Help! Fire! Fire!' I met people already hurrying to the scene and went back with them to watch.

By this time the whole house was one dreadful, magnificent holocaust, a terrifying sight, lighting up everything all round, a bonfire in which human beings were being burnt alive; and he, my prisoner, the new being, the new lord of the world, Le Horla, was being burnt too.

Suddenly the whole roof collapsed inside the walls and a volcano of flame shot up to the sky.

Through all the windows open on the blaze I could see the fiery inferno and I thought of *him* there in this furnace, dead.

Dead? I wonder. Wasn't his body, through which light could pass, impervious perhaps to what destroys our bodies?

Suppose he isn't dead! It may be that only time can destroy this invincible terror. Why should his astral body be transparent and invisible, if he had cause to fear disease, wounds, weakness, premature dissolution?

Premature dissolution? That is the sole source of fear in man. Le Horla is the next development of evolution after man. After man, who may die any day, any hour, any minute, as a result of accident, has come a being who can only die at his appointed day, hour, minute, when he has reached the term of his existence.

No! There is no doubt, no doubt whatever, that he is not dead! So there is nothing left for me to do but to kill myself!

THE NECKLACE

SHE was one of those attractive pretty girls, born by a freak of fortune in a lower-middle-class family. She had no dowry, no expectations, no way of getting known, appreciated, loved and married by some wealthy gentleman of good family. And she allowed herself to be married to a junior clerk in the Ministry of Public Instruction.

She dressed plainly, having no money to spend on herself. But she was as unhappy as if she had known better days. Women have no sense of caste or breeding, their beauty, their grace, and their charm taking the place of birth and family. Their natural refinement, their instinctive delicacy and adaptability are their only passport to society, and these qualities enable daughters of the people to compete with ladies of gentle birth.

She always had a sense of frustration, feeling herself born for all the refinements and luxuries of life. She hated the bareness of her flat, the shabbiness of the walls, the worn upholstery of the chairs, and the ugliness of the curtains. All these things, which another woman of her class would not even have noticed, were pain and grief to her. The sight of the little Breton maid doing her simple house-work aroused in her passionate regrets and hopeless dreams. She imagined hushed ante-rooms hung with oriental fabrics and lit by tall bronze candelabra, with two impressive footmen in knee-breeches dozing in great armchairs, made drowsy by the heat of radiators. She imagined vast drawing-rooms, upholstered in antique silk, splendid pieces of furniture littered with priceless curios, and dainty scented boudoirs, designed for tea-time conversation with intimate friends and much sought-after society gentlemen, whose attentions every woman envies and desires.

When she sat down to dinner at the round table covered with a three-days-old cloth opposite her husband, who took the lid off

the casserole with the delighted exclamation: 'Ah! hot-pot again! How lovely! It's the best dish in the world!', she was dreaming of luxurious dinners with gleaming silver and tapestries peopling the walls with classical figures and exotic birds in a fairy forest; she dreamt of exquisite dishes served on valuable china and whispered compliments listened to with a sphinx-like smile, while toying with the pink flesh of a trout or the wing of a hazel-hen.

She had a rich friend who had been with her at a convent school, but she did not like going to see her now, the contrast was so painful when she went home. She spent whole days in tears; misery, regrets, hopeless longings caused her such bitter distress.

One evening her husband came home with a broad smile on his face and a large envelope in his hand: 'Look!' he cried. 'Here's something for you, dear!'

She tore open the envelope eagerly and pulled out a printed card with the words: 'The Minister of Public Instruction and Mme Georges Ramponneau request the honour of the company of M. and Mme Loisel at the Ministry on the evening of Monday, January 18th.'

Instead of being delighted as her husband had hoped, she threw the invitation pettishly down on the table, murmuring: 'What's the good of this to me?'

'But I thought you'd be pleased, dear! You never go out and this is an occasion, a great occasion. I had the greatest difficulty to get the invitation. Everybody wants one; it's very select and junior clerks don't often get asked. The whole official world will be there.'

She looked at him crossly and declared impatiently: 'What do you think I'm to wear?'

He hadn't thought of that and stuttered: 'Why! the frock you wear for the theatre. I think it's charming!'

He stopped in astonished bewilderment when he saw his wife was crying. Two great tears were running slowly down from the corners of her eyes to the corners of her mouth; he stammered: 'What's the matter? What's the matter?'

But with a great effort she had controlled her disappointment and replied quietly, drying her wet cheeks: 'Oh! Nothing! Only not having anything to wear I can't go to the party. Pass on the invitation to some colleague whose wife is better dressed than I.'

'Look here, Mathilde! How much would a suitable frock cost, something quite simple that would be useful on other occasions later on?'

She thought for a few seconds, doing a sum and also wondering how much she could ask for without inviting an immediate refusal and an outraged exclamation from the close-fisted clerk. At last with some hesitation she replied: 'I don't know exactly but I think I could manage on four hundred francs.'

He went slightly pale, for this was just the amount he had put by to get a gun so that he could enjoy some shooting the following summer on the Nanterre plain with some friends who went out lark-shooting on Sundays. But he said, 'Right! I'll give you four hundred francs, but try and get a really nice frock.'

The date of the party was approaching and Mme Loisel seemed depressed and worried, though her dress was ready. One evening her husband said to her: 'What's the matter? The last three days you've not been yourself.'

She replied, 'It's rotten not to have a piece of jewellery, not a stone of any kind, to wear. I shall look poverty-stricken. I'd rather not go to the party.'

He answered: 'But you can wear some real flowers. That's very smart this year. For ten francs you could get two or three magnificent roses.'

She was not impressed. 'No, there's nothing more humiliating than to look poor in a crowd of wealthy women.'

But her husband suddenly cried: 'What a fool you are! Go to your friend, Mme Forestier, and ask her to lend you some of her jewellery. You know her well enough to do that.'

She uttered a joyful cry: 'That's a good idea! I'd never thought of it!'

Next day she went to her friend's house and explained her dilemma.

Mme Forestier went to a glass-fronted wardrobe, took out a large casket, brought it over, opened it, and said to Mme Loisel

'Take what you like, my dear!'

First she looked at bracelets, then a pearl collar, then a Venetian cross in gold and stones, a lovely piece of work. She tried the various ornaments in front of the glass, unable to make up her mind to take them off and put them back, she kept asking: 'Haven't you got anything else?'

'Yes, go on looking, I don't know what you would like.'

Suddenly she found a black satin case containing a magnificent diamond necklace, and she wanted it so desperately that her heart began to thump. Her hands were shaking, as she picked it up. She put it round her throat over her high blouse and stood in ecstasy before her reflection in the glass. Then, hesitatingly, her anxiety showing in her voice: 'Could you lend me that, just that, nothing else?'

'But of course!'

She threw her arms round her friend's neck and kissed her wildly, and hurried home with her treasure.

The day of the party arrived. Mme Loisel had a triumph. She was the prettiest woman in the room, elegant, graceful, smiling, in the seventh heaven of happiness. All the men looked at her, asked who she was, and wanted to be introduced. All the private secretaries wanted to dance with her. The Minister himself noticed her.

She danced with inspired abandon, intoxicated with delight, thinking of nothing in the triumph of her beauty and the glory of her success, she was wrapped in a cloud of happiness, the result of all the compliments, all the admiration, all these awakened desires, that wonderful success so dear to every woman's heart.

She left about four in the morning. Her husband had been dozing since midnight in a small, empty drawing-room with three other gentlemen, whose wives were also enjoying themselves.

He threw over her shoulders the wraps he had brought for going home, her simple everyday coat, whose plainness clashed with the smartness of her ball dress. She was conscious of this and wanted to hurry away, so as not to be noticed by the ladies who were putting on expensive fur wraps.

Loisel tried to stop her: 'Wait a minute! You'll catch cold outside. I'll call a cab.'

But she would not listen and ran down the stairs. When they got into the street they could not find a cab and began to hunt for one, shouting to the drivers they saw passing in the distance. In despair they went down towards the Seine, shivering. At last, on the Embankment they found one of those old broughams that ply by night and are only seen in Paris after dark, as if ashamed of their shabbiness in the daytime. It took them back to their house in the Rue des Martyrs and they went sadly up to their flat. For her this was the end, and he was remembering that he had got to be at the office at ten o'clock.

She took off the wraps she had put round her shoulders, standing in front of the glass to see herself once more in all her glory. But suddenly she uttered a cry, the diamond necklace was no longer round her neck. Her husband, already half undressed, asked: 'What's the matter?'

She turned to him in a panic. 'Mme Forestier's necklace has gone!'

He stood up, dumbfounded. 'What? What do you mean? It's impossible!'

They searched in the folds of her dress, in the folds of her cloak, in the pockets, everywhere, they could not find it. He asked: 'Are you sure you had it on when you left the ball?'

'Yes, I fingered it in the hall at the Ministry.'

'But, if you had lost it in the street, we should have heard it drop. It must be in the cab.'

'Yes, it probably is. Did you take the number?'

'No! And you didn't notice it, I suppose?'

'No!'

They looked at each other, utterly crushed. Finally Loisel dressed again: 'I'll go back along the way we walked and see if I can find it.'

He went out and she remained in her evening dress, without the strength even to go to bed, collapsed on a chair, without a fire, her mind a blank.

Her husband returned about seven, having found nothing. He went to the police station, to the papers to offer a reward, to the cab companies, in fact anywhere that gave a flicker of hope.

She waited all day in the same state of dismay at this appalling catastrophe. Loisel came back in the evening, his face pale and lined; he had discovered nothing.

'You must write to your friend,' he said, 'and say you have broken the clasp of the necklace and are getting it mended. That will give us time to turn round.'

So she wrote at his dictation. After a week they had lost all hope and Loisel, who had aged five years, declared: 'We must do something about replacing it.'

Next day they took the case which had contained the necklace to the jeweller whose name was in it. He looked up his books: 'I did not sell the jewel, Madame; I must only have supplied the case.'

They went from jeweller to jeweller, looking for a necklace like the other, trying to remember exactly what it was like, both of them sick with worry and anxiety.

At last in the Palais-Royal they found a diamond necklace just like the one lost. Its price was forty thousand francs, but they could have it for thirty-six thousand.

So they asked the jeweller to keep it for three days. They made it a condition that he should take it back for thirty-four thousand if the first was found before the end of February.

Loisel had got eighteen thousand francs which his father had left him; he would borrow the rest.

He borrowed one thousand francs from one, five hundred from

another, one hundred here, sixty there. He gave I.O.U.s and notes of hand on ruinous terms, going to the Jews and money-lenders of every kind. He mortgaged the whole of the rest of his life, risked his signature on bills without knowing if he would ever be able to honour it; he was tormented with anxiety about the future, with the thought of the crushing poverty about to descend upon him and the prospect of physical privations and mental agony. Then he went and collected the necklace, putting down the thirty-six thousand francs on the jeweller's counter.

When Mme Loisel took the necklace back to Mme Forestier, the latter said rather coldly: 'You ought to have brought it back sooner; I might have wanted it.'

She did not open the case, as her friend had feared she might. If she had detected the replacement what would she have thought? What would she have said? Would she have considered her a thief?

Now Mme Loisel learnt to know the grim life of the very poor. However she faced the position with heroic courage. This ghastly debt must be paid and she would pay it. They got rid of the maid; they gave up the flat and took an attic under the tiles. She did all the heavy work of the house as well as the hateful kitchen jobs. She washed up, ruining her pink nails on the coarse crockery and the bottoms of the saucepans. She washed the dirty linen and shirts and the kitchen cloths and dried them on a line. She carried the rubbish down to the street every morning and brought up the water, stopping on every floor to get her breath. And dressed as a woman of the people, she went to the fruiterer, the grocer and the butcher with her basket on her arm, bargaining in spite of their rudeness and fighting for every penny of her miserable pittance.

Every month some notes of hand had to be paid off and others renewed to gain time. Her husband worked in the evening keeping a tradesman's books and often at night he did copying at twenty-five centimes a page. This life went on for ten years.

After ten years they had paid everything back, including the interest and the accumulated compound interest.

Mme Loisel now looked an old woman. She had become the strong, tough, coarse woman we find in the homes of the poor. Her hair was neglected, her skirt was askew, her hands were red and her voice loud; she even scrubbed the floors. But sometimes, when her husband was at the office, she would sit down near the window and dream of that evening long ago, the ball at which she had been such a success.

What would have happened to her if she had not lost the necklace? Who can say? Life is such a strange thing with its changes and chances. Such a little thing can make or mar it!

One Sunday, when she had gone for a stroll in the Champs-Élysées as a change from the week's grind, she suddenly saw a lady taking a child for a walk. It was Mme Forestier, still young, still beautiful, still attractive.

Mme Loisel felt a wave of emotion. Should she speak to her? Yes, she would. Now that she had paid, she would tell her everything. Why not?

She went up to her: 'Good morning, Jeanne!'

The other woman did not recognize her, surprised at being addressed in this familiar fashion by a common woman; she stammered: 'But, Madame . . . I don't know you . . . there must be some mistake.'

'No! I'm Mathilde Loisel!'

Her friend exclaimed: 'Oh! Poor Mathilde, how you've changed!'

'Yes, I've had a pretty grim time since I saw you last, with lots of trouble – and it was all your fault!'

'My fault? What do you mean?'

'You remember that diamond necklace you lent me to go to the party at the Ministry?'

'Yes, what about it?'

'Well! I lost it!'

'What! But you brought it back to me.'

'I brought you back another exactly like it; and for ten years

we've been paying for it. You'll realize it hasn't been easy, for we had no money of our own. Well, now it's all over and I'm jolly glad!

Mme Forestier had stopped: 'You say you bought a diamond necklace to replace mine?'

'Yes! And you never spotted it, did you? They were as like as two peas.'

And she smiled with simple proud pleasure.

Mme Forestier, deeply moved, took both her hands. 'Oh! my poor Mathilde! But mine was only paste, not worth more than five hundred francs at most!'

THE UMBRELLA

MME OREILLE was a thrifty soul. She knew the value of a half-penny and practised all the strictest methods of saving money. Her servant must have found it very hard to find bargains in the market to satisfy her. M. Oreille had the greatest difficulty in getting his pocket money, though they were quite comfortably off and had no children. But Mme Oreille was genuinely pained every time she saw a silver coin leave the house; it cut her to the heart. And whenever she had to expend any considerable sum, however necessary, she always slept badly the following night!

Oreille was continually saying to his wife: 'You really needn't be so close – we never spend our income.'

She would answer: 'One never knows what may happen; it's far better to have too much than too little.'

She was a small woman of forty, energetic, wrinkled, clean, and often bad-tempered.

Her husband was always complaining about the things she made him do without. There were certain things in particular that pained him, because they hurt his pride.

He was a Chief Clerk in the Ministry of War and only stayed on there in obedience to his wife to increase the income they never spent. For two years he had gone to the office with the same patched umbrella to the great amusement of his colleagues. At last tired of their jokes he insisted on his wife buying him a new umbrella. She got one for eight and a half francs, offered cheap as an advertisement by one of the big stores; Paris was flooded with thousands of these articles and, when the other clerks saw it, they began making fun of him again and Oreille felt it deeply. The umbrella was no good and in three months it was useless, to the great joy of the whole Ministry. They even made a song about it which was heard from morning to night all over the huge building.

Exasperated, Oreille ordered his wife to get him a new broly in good silk for twenty francs and bring him the receipt to show she had done so.

She bought one for eighteen francs and, flushing with irritation, declared, as she gave it to her husband: 'There! That's got to last you five years at least!'

To his great satisfaction Oreille enjoyed a triumph at the office.

When he came home in the evening his wife, with an anxious glance at the umbrella, said: 'You oughtn't to keep it rolled up tight in its elastic band. That's the way to cut the silk. It's up to you to take care of it, because I'm not going to get you another yet awhile.'

She took it, undid the band and opened it out, but stopped, flabbergasted. There was a round hole the size of a centime in the middle of the umbrella. It was a cigar burn.

She stammered: 'What's happened to it?'

Her husband without looking replied calmly: 'What? What do you mean?'

She was speechless with anger and couldn't speak.

'You . . . you've burnt your umbrella - you're . . . you're crazy . . . you want to ruin us!'

He went pale and turned round: 'What do you mean?'

'I say you've burnt your umbrella - look!'

And rushing at him as if she meant to hit him, she held the little circular hole under his nose.

Aghast at the damage, he stammered: 'What has happened? I don't know; I've done nothing, nothing at all, I swear. I can't think what has happened to the thing.'

She was now shouting: 'I bet you've been playing the fool with it at the office like a clown in the circus; you've been opening it to show it off.'

He replied: 'I did open it once to show what a lovely umbrella it was. That's all, I swear.'

But she was stamping with fury and proceeded to make one of those wifely scenes which render the home more terrifying to a peace-loving man than the field of battle with its rain of bullets.

She patched it with a bit of silk of a different colour from the old gamp, and next morning Oreille went off humbly with the mended article. He put it in his cupboard and banished it from his mind like some unpleasant memory.

But hardly was he home in the evening when his wife snatched the umbrella from him and opened it to examine its condition. She stood speechless before an irreparable disaster. It was riddled with little holes, obviously the result of burns, as if the ashes of a lighted pipe had been knocked out into it. It was done for, irremediably finished.

She gazed at the havoc without a word, too angry to speak. He saw the damage and remained dazed and terrified in speechless consternation. They looked at each other and he lowered his eyes, then he received full in the face the damaged article which she hurled at him. Finally, finding her voice again in an outburst of rage, she screamed. Ah! you wretch, you wretch, you did it on purpose, but you'll pay for it, you shan't have another!

And the scene began all over again. After she had stormed at him for an hour, he at last had a chance to explain. He swore he could not understand it, someone must have done it out of spite or vengeance. He was saved by a ring at the bell. It was a friend coming to dinner.

Mme Oreille retired the matter to him. As for buying another umbrella, there was no question of it — her husband would have to do without one.

The friend argued reasonably 'Then, Madam, his clothes, which must be worth much more, will suffer.'

The little woman, still furious, replied 'Well, he can have the kitchen umbrella, I'm not going to give him another silk one.'

At the idea of this Oreille revolted: 'In that case I shall resign. I won't go to the Ministry with a kitchen umbrella!'

The friend went on: 'Have this one re-covered; that won't cost much.'

Mme Oreille stammered with exasperation: 'It'll cost at least eight francs to re-cover it. Eight and eighteen makes twenty-six. Twenty-six francs for an umbrella - why, it's crazy!'

The friend, a poor lower-middle-class man, had an inspiration: 'Get your Insurance Company to pay. They all pay for things burnt, provided the damage occurred at home.'

This suggestion calmed the little women down at once, and after a moment's thought she said to her husband:

'To-morrow, before you go to your Ministry you must go to the office of the Maternelle Insurance Company and report the state of your umbrella and put in a claim.'

M. Oreille started. 'I shouldn't dare. It's eighteen francs gone west, that's all, it won't ruin us.'

Next day he went out with a stick. Fortunately it was fine.

Left by herself in the house, Mme Oreille was in despair over the loss of her eighteen francs. She had the umbrella on the dining-room table and kept walking round and round it, unable to make up her mind. She couldn't get the thought of the Insurance Company out of her mind, but she dared not face the mocking glances of the gentlemen who would receive her, for she was shy in public, apt to blush for no reason, and always embarrassed when she had to speak to strangers.

But her regret for the eighteen francs festered in her mind like a wound and the thought of her loss was pain and grief to her. But what could she do? The hours passed and she could not make up her mind. Then suddenly like a coward becoming bold she reached a decision: 'I'll go myself and we'll see.'

But first she had to work on the umbrella to make the disaster complete and her case convincing. She took a match from the chimney-piece and burnt a large hole between the ribs as big as your hand; next she carefully rolled what was left of the silk and fastened it with the elastic band, put on her hat and shawl, and

hurried off to the Rue de Rivoli where the Insurance Office was.

But as she approached she went slower and slower. What story was she to tell? What would they say?

She looked at the numbers on the buildings. There were still twenty-eight before she got there. Good! She had time to think. She walked slower and slower. Suddenly she started. She was at the door with the words 'The Maternelle Fire Insurance Company' in bright gold lettering. Already! She paused for a moment, harassed and ashamed, passed the door and came back, then passed it again and came back again. Finally she said to herself: 'I must face it; the sooner the better!'

But as she went in she felt her heart thumping.

She walked into a vast hall with little windows all round and through each window a man's head was visible, his body being hidden by a grating.

A gentleman appeared with papers in his hand. She stopped and asked him shyly: 'Excuse me, Sir, could you tell me where I must apply to recover on articles damaged by fire?'

He replied in loud, confident tones: 'First floor, on the left at the Accident office!'

His words increased her nervousness and she would have liked to run away, say nothing, and sacrifice her eighteen francs. But at the thought of this sum she recovered a little courage and went up the stairs panting and pausing at each step.

On the first floor she saw a door and knocked. A loud voice said: 'Come in!'

She entered and found herself in a big room where three gentlemen, wearing decorations, were standing in solemn conversation. One of them asked: 'What is your business, Madame?'

She was tongue-tied, and stammered: 'I've come . . . I've come . . . about an accident.'

The gentleman politely pointed to a chair: 'Pray be seated. I shall be at your service in a minute.'

And turning back to the other two he resumed his conversation:

'The Company does not consider itself bound for more than four hundred thousand francs. We cannot admit your claim for the further one hundred thousand you ask for. Moreover, the valuation . . .'

One of the two men interrupted him: 'That is enough, Sir! The courts must decide. We are wasting our time here.'

And after bowing formally several times they left the room.

If she had dared to go out with them, how glad she would have been! She would have given up the whole thing and fled; but she could not do it. The gentleman returned and said with a bow: 'What can I do for you, Madame?'

She said, speaking with difficulty: 'I've come about this.'

The Manager looked down in amused surprise at the object she held out to him. She was trying with trembling hands to undo the elastic band. After several attempts she succeeded and opened the ragged skeleton of the umbrella. The man said sympathetically: 'It certainly does seem in a poor way!'

She declared with some hesitation: 'It cost twenty francs.'

He showed surprise: 'Really! As much as that!'

'Yes, it was a first class article. I wanted you to see its present condition.'

'Quite so! I see. Quite so! But I don't see how that concerns me.'

She suddenly became worried. Perhaps the Company did not compensate for the loss of such small objects, and she said: 'But it has been burnt.'

The gentleman agreed: 'So I observe!'

She remained open-mouthed, not knowing what to say next. Then suddenly remembering something she had forgotten she hastened to add: 'I am Madame Oreille; we are insured with The Maternelle and I am here to claim the amount of the damage.'

She added hurriedly, fearing a definite refusal: 'I'm only asking you to have it re-covered.'

The Manager, much embarrassed, declared: 'But, Madame, we

are not an umbrella shop. We cannot undertake repairs of that kind.'

The little woman recovered her self-possession. She had got to fight! Well, she would fight! No longer nervous, she said: 'I only ask for the price of the repairs. I'll get it done myself.'

The gentleman showed some confusion: 'Indeed, Madame, it is a very small matter; we are never asked to pay for such infinitesimally small damage. We cannot be expected, you will agree, to replace handkerchiefs, gloves, brooms, slippers, all the small articles which are exposed every day to the risk of fire.'

She flushed, beginning to lose her temper: 'But, Sir, last December we had a chimney on fire which caused at least five hundred francs worth of damage, and M. Oreille put in no claim on the Company. So it is only just that I should be paid for my umbrella.'

The Manager, guessing that she was lying, said with a smile: 'You will admit, Madame, that it is very surprising that M. Oreille, having made no claim for damage to the amount of five hundred francs, should now ask for five or six francs for the repair of an umbrella.'

Not a bit abashed, she retorted: 'Excuse me, Sir, but the loss of the five hundred francs affected the purse of M. Oreille, while the present damage of eighteen affects that of Madame Oreille which is not at all the same thing.'

He saw that he would not get rid of her without wasting his whole day; so he said with resignation: 'Will you be so good as to tell me how the accident happened?'

Scenting victory, she began her story: 'It was like this, Sir. In my hall I've got a sort of bronze thing, where people put umbrellas and walking-sticks. Well, when I got home the other day, I shoved this umbrella into it. I must explain that immediately above it there is a shelf for candles and matches. I reached up and took four matches. I struck one which didn't light. I struck another, which lit and immediately went out. I struck a third with the same result.'

The Manager interjected a witticism: 'They must have been Government matches!'

She failed to take the point and went on: 'They may have been. Anyhow the fourth worked and I lit my candle. After that I went to my room to go to bed. But after a quarter of an hour I thought I smelt burning. I've always been nervous of fire. If we ever have an accident it won't be my fault. Especially since the fire in the chimney I've told you of, I've been frightened. So I got up and went down. I looked about and sniffed round like a hound and at last I found my umbrella burnt. You see the state it's in.'

The Manager had made up his mind and asked: 'What is your estimate of the amount of the damage?'

She made no answer, not daring to give a figure. Then, wishing to show generosity, she said: 'Have it repaired yourself. I'm quite ready to trust you.'

He refused: 'No, Madame, I can't do that. Tell me how much you claim.'

'Well, it seems to me . . . Look here, Sir, I don't want to make money out of you. We'll fix it like this. I'll take the umbrella to a shop and get it re-covered in good wearing silk and bring you the bill. Will that suit you?'

'Certainly, Madame. That's agreed. Here's a note to the pay-desk, which will reimburse what you spend.'

And he handed a chit to Madame Oreille who got up and hurried away, fearing he might change his mind.

This time she went cheerfully down the street, looking for a smart umbrella shop. When she found an expensive-looking place, she went in and said in a confident tone of voice: 'I want this umbrella re-covered in silk, the best silk you've got. I don't mind what I pay.'

LOVE

THREE PAGES FROM A SPORTSMAN'S NOTE-BOOK

I'VE just been reading in the News in Brief column of a paper about a love tragedy. He killed her and then killed himself; *ergo* he loved her. The subject, the 'he' or the 'she', makes no difference; it is only the love that interests me. And I have this interest, not because it stirs my sympathy or surprises me, not because it moves me or makes me think, but because it revives a youthful memory of an incident out shooting, when love was revealed to me as vividly as the crosses which the early Christians saw in the sky.

I was born with all the instincts and feelings of primitive man, modified by the reasoning and emotions of civilization. I am passionately devoted to sport, and the bleeding creature, the blood on its wings and the blood on my hands excite me so much that I feel faint.

That year in the late autumn the first cold snap came suddenly and I was invited by my cousin, Karl de Rauville, to join him for some early morning duck shooting in the marshes.

My cousin was a cheery soul, about forty, red-haired, immensely strong, with a full beard, a typical country squire, friendly if lacking in polish, with a sense of humour which redeemed his want of culture. He lived in a house, half mansion, half farm, in a broad valley with a river running through it. On both sides the hills were covered with woods, old forests dating back to feudal days, which still contained splendid trees and the rarest types of feather to be found in this part of France. Occasionally eagles were shot here; and migratory birds, which rarely visit our over-populated countries, were almost sure to pause in these century-old branches, as if they sensed or recognized a little bit of forest going back to the

dim past still waiting to shelter them for their brief night's rest on their journey.

In the valley were patches of tall grass, watered by irrigation channels and separated by hedges; then further down, the river, which was artificially banked up at this point, spread out into a vast marsh. This marsh, the finest spot for shooting I have ever seen, was my cousin's main preoccupation in life and he looked after it like a park. Through the extensive reed-beds, which covered it and gave it life with their rustling and heaving, narrow channels had been cut, by which flat-bottomed punts, propelled and steered with poles, glided silently over the stagnant water, rubbing against the rushes, scaring the fish which darted among the stems, and making the wild duck with their black heads and sharp beaks suddenly dive out of sight.

Water exercises an uncontrollable fascination over me. I love the sea, though it is too big, too restless, and you can't possess it; I love rivers, though they are always flowing on out of your sight; above all I love marshes, where the hidden palpitating life in the water is going on all the time. A swamp is a whole microcosm in itself, with its own life, its permanent denizens and its migratory population, its cries, its noises and above all its mystery. Nothing is more intimidating, more disturbing, sometimes even more terrifying than a marsh. I often wonder why these watery flats are so frightening. Is it the inarticulate rustle of the reeds, is it the mysterious will-o'-the-wisps, or the absolute silence over them on windless nights, or is it those strange mists drifting over the rushes like palls, or is it the almost inaudible ripple of the water, so faint, so soft, and yet sometimes more frightening than the big guns man has invented or the thunder of the sky, which makes marshes like dreamland, a country to be feared because it hides some dangerous secret which none may guess?

No! There is something else in the atmosphere of a marsh, a mystery deeper, more impressive, concealed in the thick swirling mists, perhaps the mystery of the creation of life itself. For it was

in the stagnant waters of the primeval swamp, in the heavy damp air of the earth under the warmth of the sun, that the first germ of protoplasm stirred and moved and hatched into life.

I reached my cousin's house in the evening. It was freezing like bricks. In the great hall the dressers, the walls, and the ceilings were covered with stuffed birds with outspread wings or perched on branches nailed to the wall, sparrowhawks, herons, owls, goat-suckers, buzzards, tiercelets, vultures, falcons. During dinner, my cousin, looking like some strange arctic animal himself in a sealskin jacket, told me of the arrangements for that very night.

We were to start at half past three in order to reach our butts at about half past four. At this spot a hut made of blocks of ice had been erected to afford us some shelter against the terrible wind which blows just before sunrise, bringing with it cold which lacerates the skin like a saw, cuts it like a knife, pricks it like poisoned needles, tears it like pincers, and sears it like fire.

My cousin was rubbing his hands: 'I've never seen such a frost,' he said, 'we've already got twelve degrees Centigrade of frost at six in the evening.'

Immediately after the meal I went and threw myself on my bed and went to sleep by the light of a great blaze roaring up the chimney.

I was called on the stroke of three o'clock. I now put on a sheepskin and found my cousin Karl wrapped in a bearskin. After we had each swallowed two cups of boiling hot coffee, followed by two glasses of brandy, we set out accompanied by a gamekeeper and our dogs, Diver and Pierrot.

After a few steps I was chilled to the bone; it was one of those nights when the earth seems frozen to death. The icy air hits you and hurts like something solid. Not a breath stirs it, it is frozen into immobility; it bites, pierces, dries up, kills trees, plants, and insects; little birds themselves fall from the branches to the frozen ground, stiffened like it in the grip of the cold.

The pallid moon, all lopsided in its last quarter, was floating

feebly in the sky, as if too weak to set, immobilized by the cold. Its light shone dim and faint, with that wan lurid glare that marks the end of its monthly brilliance.

We walked along side by side, Karl and I, our shoulders bent, our hands deep in our pockets, and our guns under our arms. Our boots, wrapped in woollen cloths to enable us to walk without slipping on the frozen river, made no sound and I could see the white mist made by the dogs' breath. We soon reached the edge of the marsh and entered one of the lanes through the forest of dry rushes.

Our elbows brushed against the long ribbon-like fronds and left a low rustle behind us. I was conscious to a greater degree than ever before of the strange overpowering emotion aroused in me by marshes. The swamp was dead, frozen to death, and we were able to walk over it through its host of gaunt reeds.

Suddenly at a bend in one of the paths I caught sight of the igloo that had been built to shelter us. I went in, and, as we had nearly an hour to wait before the migratory birds would wake up, I rolled myself up in my rug to try to get warm.

Lying on my back I watched the distorted shape of the moon, which, as seen through the dimly transparent walls of our ice hut, had four horns.

But the cold of the frozen marsh, the cold of the ice walls, the cold of the atmosphere soon got right into me and I began to cough.

My cousin, Karl, suddenly anxious on my account, cried: 'Never mind if we don't get much to-day; I don't want you to catch cold, we'll make a fire.' And he told the gamekeeper to cut some rushes.

We made a heap of them in the middle of our igloo and knocked a hole in the roof to let the smoke escape. When the red tongues of flame began to lick the transparent ice walls, they started, very slowly, to melt, as though the ice-blocks were sweating. Karl, who had stayed outside, shouted: 'Come out and look!' I went out and

stood there amazed at the sight. Our conical hut looked like a huge diamond with a heart of fire suddenly thrust up from the frozen waters of the marsh. Inside we could see two fantastic shapes, those of our dogs warming themselves.

Presently an eerie cry as of some lost soul flying overhead rang out. The light of our blaze was waking the wild fowl.

Nothing is so thrilling as this first sound of life, one can see nothing, but suddenly in the distance it echoes through the darkness, before the first light appears on the horizon on a winter's morning. In the icy cold of the dawn this faint cry, dying away as the bird flies off, always seems to me like a sigh uttered by the world-soul.

Karl kept shouting 'Put out the fire! This is the dawn!'

In fact the sky was beginning to lighten and all across it skeins of duck were tracing long black lines, which rapidly disappeared.

There was a flash in the darkness. Karl had just fired and the two dogs dashed forward. After that both of us, taking rapid aim, kept on firing every time the shadow of a flock of duck appeared above the rushes. And Diver and Pierrot, panting with excitement, brought in the bleeding birds, whose glazing eyes could still sometimes look at us.

By now it was broad daylight and the sky was clear and blue. Down the valley the sun was visible and we were thinking of going home, when two birds with necks outstretched and wings spread flew past overhead. I fired. One of them fell almost at my feet, it was a silver-bellied teal. Presently from the sky above me came a bird's cry. It was a sad cry, short, repeated, plaintive, and the survivor of the pair began wheeling round in the air overhead, never taking its eye off its mate which I had in my hand.

Karl, kneeling on one knee with his gun to his shoulder, was watching it closely, waiting till it was near enough. 'You've shot the female,' he said, 'the male won't leave her.' He certainly made no attempt to get away, but went on circling round with plaintive cries. I have never heard a moan of pain that touched me like that.

despairing cry, the sorrowful lament of this poor creature left alone in space.

Sometimes he made as if to fly away out of range of the gun that was following his flight; he seemed about to continue his journey alone through the sky. But he could not bring himself to do so and soon returned, looking for his mate.

'Leave your bird on the ground,' said Karl, 'he'll soon come close.'

And so he did, heedless of the danger, his instinctive love for his mate whom I had shot making him reckless of his own life.

Karl fired. It was as if a string on which the bird had been suspended had been cut. I saw a dark mass plunge down and heard the sound of a body falling into the reeds; and in a minute Pierrot brought the bird to my feet.

I put the two birds, already dead and cold, in the same game-bag – and I went back to Paris the same day.

A TWELFTH-NIGHT PARTY

I REMEMBER that Twelfth-Night party during the war as clearly as if it was yesterday, cried Captain Comte de Garens. At that time I was Sergeant of Horse in a Hussar regiment and I had been prowling about on reconnaissance in front of a German advance guard for a fortnight. The day before we had killed a few Lancers and lost three of our own men, including poor little Raudeville – you remember him, Joseph de Raudeville.

Well, that day my captain told me to take ten troopers and occupy the village of Porterin and hold it all night. There had been five engagements in three weeks in the place, and there weren't twenty houses left standing and not more than a dozen of the inhabitants had stayed in this wasps' nest.

So I set out about four o'clock with ten men. By five, when we reached the first ruins of Porterin, it was quite dark. I halted my troop and ordered Marchas – you remember Pierre de Marchas who married the little Martel-Avelin girl, the Marquis de Martel-Avelin's daughter, later on – to make his way into the village alone and report back to me. I had picked only volunteers, all men of decent family. In the army it's a great relief not to have to hobnob with vulgarians. Marchas had his wits about him more than most; he was cunning as a fox and slippery as a snake. He could scent Prussians as a hound scents a hare; he could sniff out food, where without him we should have died of hunger, and he had an amazing knack of getting reliable information out of anybody.

In ten minutes he was back.

'It's all right,' he said, 'there have been no Prussians through here for three days. It's a pretty grim spot, this village, but I've had a chat with a good Sister of Mercy who is looking after four or five sick folk in a deserted convent.'

I gave the word to advance and we made our way to the main

street. To right and left we could see roofless houses dimly in the darkness. Here and there a light shone in a window; some family had remained to look after a more or less undamaged house, either because they were brave or had nothing to lose. It began to rain, a fine cold rain, which chilled us as it touched our cloaks, before we even got soaked. Our horses stumbled over the cobbles, over beams and pieces of furniture. Marchas led the party on foot, dragging his horse by the bridle.

'Where are you taking us to?' I asked.

He replied: 'I've found an excellent billet.'

He stopped presently in front of a small middle-class house that was undamaged and all shut up, on the street with a garden behind. Marchas forced the lock of the gate with a pebble he picked up near it, went up the outside steps, burst open the front door with a kick and a push of the shoulder, lit the candle-end he always carried in his pocket, and led the way into an excellent comfortable house, obviously belonging to someone quite well off; he showed us the way with the complete assurance of one who had lived there, whereas he was actually seeing it for the first time. Two men were left outside to look after the horses.

Marchas said to the portly Ponderel, who was behind him: 'The stables must be on the left - I noticed them as we came in. So put the animals in there - we shan't need them.'

Then, turning to me, he said: 'Well! what are your orders?'

He was always surprising me; I never knew when he was serious. I replied with a smile: 'I'm going to post sentries round the village. I'll be back in a minute.'

He asked: 'How many men are you taking?'

'Five, the others will relieve them at ten o'clock.'

'Good! That leaves me four to forage, cook, and lay the table. I'm going to find where the wine is hidden.'

I went off to reconnoitre the deserted streets as far as the edge of the village and post my sentries. I was back in half an hour. I found Marchas lolling in a great old-fashioned reclining armchair, from

which he had removed the dust-sheet – he liked things to be as they should be, he said. He was warming his feet at the fire, smoking an excellent cigar whose aroma filled the room. He was alone with his elbows on the arms of the chair and his head sunk between his shoulders, his cheeks pink and his eyes bright, the picture of contentment.

I could hear the clatter of plates in the next room. Marchas said with a blissful smile: ‘All is well! I found the claret in the hen-house and the champagne under the steps outside; the brandy – fifty bottles of the best – was in the orchard under a pear-tree, which by the light of my lantern looked a bit crooked. In the way of solid food we’ve got two hens, a goose, a duck, three pigeons, and a blackbird in a cage – not much there except feathers as you see. It’s all cooking at this moment. This is a damned good spot!’

I had sat down in front of him; the fire was roaring up the chimney, catching my nose and cheeks.

‘Where did you get the fire-wood?’ I asked.

He murmured: ‘Excellent wood from the owner’s brougham! It’s the paint that makes it blaze, a punch made with turps and varnish. A well equipped place, this!’

I laughed – he was a regular card! He went on: ‘And to-night is Twelfth-Night; I’ve had a bean put in the goose, but it’s a pity we’ve got no Queen!’

I echoed his lament: ‘Yes! It is a pity but what can I do about it?’

‘It’s up to you to find one, of course!’

‘Find what?’

‘Why, women, naturally!’

‘Women! You’re crazy!’

‘Well, I found brandy under a pear-tree and champagne under the outside steps – and I had nothing to go on. You can always find a skirt! So go along and look for one, old man!’

He said this so seriously and gravely, with such an air of conviction, that I didn’t know if he was really joking. I answered: ‘You can’t be serious, Marchas!’

'I never jest on active service!'

'But where the devil am I to find women?'

'Anywhere you like! There must be two or three left in the place. Hunt them up and bring them along!'

I got up; the fire was too hot for me. Marchas went on: 'May I offer a suggestion?'

'Yes!'

'Go and find the priest!'

'The priest! Why?'

'Invite him to supper and ask him to bring a lady!'

'The priest! A lady! That's good!'

Marchas continued with absolute seriousness: 'No! I'm not joking. Go and find the priest and explain the position. He must be awfully bored here and I'm sure he'll come. Tell him we must have at least one woman, a lady, of course, as we are gentlemen. He must know all about the women in his parish. If there is a suitable one and you do your bit right, he'll put you on to her.'

'Look here, Marchas! You're crazy!'

'My dear Garens, you're cut out for the job. It'll be great fun too. We know how to behave, I imagine; our manners will be impeccable – she'll be quite safe. Tell the Abbé who we are, make him laugh, tell him a piteous tale, talk him round, persuade him!'

'No! It can't be done!'

He moved his chair close to mine and, knowing my weakness, he continued slyly: 'Think what fun you'll have doing it and what a good story it will make. It'll spread all through the army and you'll get no end of a reputation.'

I hesitated, attracted by the idea. He pressed the matter: 'Come along, old man! You're in command of our party; so you're the only fit and proper person to approach the representative of the Church in the place. Do get on with it! I'll tell the story in verse in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* after the war, I promise you! You owe it to your men – this last month you've worked them hard enough.'

I got up, asking 'Where does the priest live?'

'Take the second street on the left – at the end of it you'll find a broad road with trees and the church at the end. The priest's house is next the church.'

As I went out, he shouted after me: 'Tell him what we've got for dinner – that'll whet his appetite!'

I found the house without difficulty next door to the big ugly brick church. I thumped on the door with my fist, there being no bell or knocker, and a loud voice answered from inside: 'Who's there?'

I replied: 'A Sergeant of Hussars!'

I heard bolts being shot back and a key turned, and found myself facing a tall portly priest with the chest of a wrestler, huge hands sticking out below turned-up cuffs, and a red face, obviously a cheery soul.

I saluted: 'Good day, Sir!'

He had feared a surprise, some trick of prowling looters, and smiled as he replied: 'Good-day, my friend! Come in!'

I followed into a small room with a red-tiled floor and a small fire, very different from the blaze Muchas had made. He pointed to a chair and said: 'What can I do for you, Sir?'

'First, Monsieur l'Abbé, let me introduce myself' – and I handed him my card. He looked at it and read in a low voice: 'Le Comte de Garens'.

I went on: 'There are eleven of us here, Sir, five on guard and six quartered in the house of someone unknown. The names of these six are: Garens – that's me – Pierre de Marchas, Ludovic de Ponderol, the Baron d'Étreillis, Karl Massouligny, son of the painter, and Joseph Herbon, a young musician. I am here to ask, in their name and my own, for the honour of your company at supper. It's a Twelfth-Night party, Sir, and we want it to be a cheery occasion.'

The priest smiled and murmured: 'It doesn't seem quite the time for a cheery party!'

I replied: 'We are fighting every day. Fourteen of our comrades

have been killed this last month and we lost three yesterday. We are gambling with our lives every day – surely we need not make long faces about it. We're Frenchmen and we like laughter; so we try to find some reason to laugh in everything. Our fathers laughed on the scaffold. This evening we should like to have a good time, like gentlemen, not like common soldiers, you understand. Are we wrong?

He answered without hesitation: 'You're quite right, my friend! I accept your invitation with the greatest pleasure.'

He shouted: 'Hermance!'

An old, bent peasant woman, hideously wrinkled, appeared and asked: 'What's up?'

'I shall be out to dinner, my daughter.'

'Where's you dining?'

'With these Hussars.'

I wanted to say: 'Bring your housekeeper along!' – just to see Marchas' face, but I didn't dare and went on: 'Among your parishioners who have remained in the village is there anyone, man or woman, whom I could ask to come along too?'

He hesitated, pondering, and then said: 'No! There's no one.'

I pressed him 'No one! Come, Sir! Think! We should like to have some ladies – I mean ladies with their husbands, of course. Perhaps the baker and his wife, the grocer, the watchmaker, the cobbler, the chemist and the chemist's lady! We've got a good dinner and good wine, and we want to leave a good impression in the village behind us.'

The priest thought for some time before declaring decidedly: 'No! There's no one!'

I began to laugh: 'Look here, Sir! We've got a bean and it's all wrong not to have a Queen. Think a minute! Haven't you got a married mayor or deputy mayor, a town-councillor with a wife, or a married schoolmaster?'

'No! All the women have gone.'

'What! Is there really not in the whole place a single honest

shopkeeper with a wife, to whom we could give this pleasure? In the present circumstances I'm sure they would enjoy themselves.'

Suddenly the priest burst out laughing, shaking with merriment, crying: 'Ah! I've got the very thing for you; by God! I have! A good time will be had by all, I promise you! And the ladies will just love it! Where are you quartered?'

I described the house and told him where it was

'Right you are! It's M Bertin-Lavaille's place. I'll be there in half-an-hour with four ladies! Yes! four ladies!'

He went out with me, still laughing, and left me, repeating: 'All right! In half-an-hour at Bertin-Lavaille's house!'

I hurried back, astonished and wondering

'How many places for supper?' asked Marchas, when he saw me.

'Eleven - six of us, plus the priest and four ladies!'

He was amazed and I was enjoying my triumph. He kept repeating 'Four ladies, you say! Do you really mean four ladies?'

'Yes! I did say four ladies!'

'Real women?'

'Yes! Real women!'

'My God! You have done well!'

'I accept your well-deserved compliment!'

He rose from his armchair and opened the door. I saw a clean white cloth on a long table, round which three Hussars in blue aprons were setting plates and glasses

'There are going to be women!' shouted Marchas

The three men danced round the table, cheering

Everything was ready. We waited for nearly an hour. A delicious smell of roast bird spread through the house

Suddenly a knock on the shutters brought us all to our feet together. The portly Ponderel ran to open and in a second or two a little Sister of Mercy appeared framed in the door. She was thin, with a wrinkled face and shy, and bowed in turn to the four astounded Hussars, who watched her come in. Behind her we heard the tapping of crutches and sticks on the tiles of the hall, and when

she had made her way into the drawing-room, I saw, one behind the other, three old crones in white caps, who hobbled and swayed in opposite directions, one tacking to the right, the next to the left. The three dear old things came in, limping and dragging a leg, deformed by disease and old age; all three were quite beyond work and were the only three inmates of the hospital, under the direction of Sister Saint-Benoît, who were capable of walking.

She turned round towards her patients, watching them carefully; then, seeing my sergeant's stripes she said: 'I must thank you, Sir, for thinking of these poor women. They have little enjoyment in life and it is for them a great pleasure as well as a great honour to be asked here.'

I saw the priest, who had remained in the shadow of the passage roaring with laughter, and I began to laugh too, especially when I saw the expression on Marchas' face. I showed the Sister where the chairs were: 'Sit down, Sister; we are very proud and happy that you have accepted our modest invitation.'

She took three chairs from against the wall, led the three old ladies to them and made them sit down, removed their sticks and shawls, which she deposited in one corner. Then, pointing to the first, a scraggy woman with a distended stomach, obviously suffering from dropsy, she introduced her: 'This is Mother Paumelle, whose husband was killed by a fall from a roof and who lost her son in Africa; she is seventy-two.'

Next she pointed to the second, a tall woman, whose head twitched all the time: 'This is Mother Jean-Jean, aged sixty-seven; she is almost blind, having had her face singed in a fire and her right leg half burnt.' Finally she indicated the third, a sort of dwarf with prominent eyes, round and vacant, which she rolled continually: 'This is the one we call "Polecat", a mental defective; she's only forty-four.'

I bowed to the three women as if I were being presented to Royalty, and said, turning to the priest: 'You're a marvel, Sir; we are all most grateful to you!'

By now everybody was laughing except Marchas who looked furious.

Suddenly Karl Massouliny announced in stentorian tones: 'Our Sister Saint-Benoît is served!'

I made her go in first with the priest; next I got Mother Paumelle up from her chair and gave her my arm, dragging her into the next room with some difficulty, for her swollen belly seemed heavier than iron. The portly Ponderel carried off Mother Jean-Jean, who begged pathetically for her crutch; and little Joseph Herbon piloted the imbecile Polecat towards the dining-room, from which a succulent smell of food was coming.

As soon as we were in our places the Sister clapped her hands three times and the women crossed themselves smartly with the precision of soldiers presenting arms; after that the priest slowly pronounced a Latin grace.

We sat down and the two hens appeared, carried in by Marchas, who insisted on serving in order to have no part as a guest in this absurd meal. But I called for the champagne. A cork popped like a pistol shot, and in spite of the protests of the priest and the Sister the three Hussars sitting by the side of the three invalid women made them drink their three well-filled glasses.

Massouliny, who had the gift of being at his ease in any company, was making love to Mother Paumelle in the most amusing way. In spite of her dropsy she had remained cheerful and answered him in a bantering falsetto, which sounded put on, and she laughed so violently at her neighbour's pleasantries that her swollen belly looked as if it were about to mount on to the table and roll about. Little Herbon was seriously occupied in making the idiot girl drunk and the Baron d'Étreillis, who was not a good mixer, was questioning Mother Jean-Jean about their life and habits and the hospital regulations. The nun, alarmed, kept shouting to Massouliny: 'You'll make her ill - don't make her laugh like that, please, Sir, don't!'

Presently she got up and fell upon Herbon in an attempt to

snatch from him a full glass which he was trying hurriedly to pour down the Polecat's throat.

The priest was roaring with laughter and kept repeating to the Sister: 'Let them alone for once, it won't do them any harm; let them be!'

Two hours later the duck with its escort of the three pigeons and the blackbird had been devoured; next came the goose, steaming and golden, disseminating a hot smell of fat browned flesh.

Paumelle clapped her hands in her excitement; Jean-Jean made no attempt to answer the Baron's numerous questions, and the Polecat uttered little gurgles of pleasure, half cries, half sighs, like children at the sight of sweets.

'Allow me to take charge of this bird,' said the priest. 'I'm an expert in dealing with a goose.'

'Certainly, Sir!'

The Sister said: 'Could we have the window open a bit? They are getting too hot; I'm sure they'll be ill.'

I turned to Marchas: 'Open the window for a minute!'

He threw it open and the cold air, blowing in from outside, made the flames of the candles flicker and the steam rising from the goose eddy round. The priest, with his napkin tucked into his collar, was removing the wings with expert skill.

We watched him at work in silence with keen interest in his fascinating operations; our appetites revived at the sight of the bird's golden skin and its limbs falling into the brown gravy at the bottom of the dish one after the other.

Suddenly in the silence, as we were absorbed in greedy anticipation, we heard through the window the distant crack of a shot.

I jumped up so quickly that I knocked my chair over backwards and shouted: 'To horse, everyone! Marchas, take two men and find out what it is! I expect you to report back here in five minutes.'

The three men galloped off, and I remained with my two other men in front of the door of the house, while the priest, the Sister,

and the three old women showed their frightened faces at the window.

We could hear nothing now except a dog barking somewhere out in the country. The rain had ceased and it was cold, very cold. Soon I caught the sound of a single horse galloping towards me. It was Marchas; I shouted: 'Well?'

He replied: 'It's nothing! François has wounded an old peasant who did not reply to his challenge and went on advancing in spite of an order to keep his distance. Anyway they're bringing him along; we shall soon see what it is.'

I had the horses put back in the stables and sent my two men off to meet the others and returned to the house. The priest, Marchas, and I brought a mattress down into the drawing-room for the wounded man. The Sister tore up a napkin to make lint for a dressing, while the three women stood dazed in a corner.

I soon made out the rattle of sabres dragging along in the road and took a candle to guide the returning soldiers. They presently appeared, carrying a long, limp, inert, sinister mass, which is all that remains of a human body when consciousness has left it.

They laid the wounded man down on the mattress prepared for him, and I saw at a glance that he was dying. There was a rattle in his throat and he was spitting blood which ran out of the corners of his mouth, expelled from his lips at each hiccup. He was covered with blood; his face, his beard, his hair, his neck, his clothes were plastered with it, as if they had been plunged in a vat of crimson dye. The blood had clotted and become dark, mixed with mud, a horrid sight.

The old man, wrapped in a great shepherd's woollen cloak, half opened his eyes from time to time; there was a dazed look in them like that of an animal which a sportsman is about to finish off, lying at his feet and gazing up at him, three parts dead already, uncomprehending, its eyes glazed with terror.

The priest cried: 'Why! It's old Father Placide, the shepherd at

Les Moulins. He's stone deaf, poor fellow, so he wouldn't hear the challenge and you've killed him.'

The Sister had opened his smock and was looking at a little purple hole in the centre of his chest, which had stopped bleeding. 'There's nothing to be done,' she said.

The shepherd was gasping painfully and spitting blood with each of his last breaths; and a sinister continuous gurgling sound was audible in his throat, going right down to his lungs.

The priest, standing over him, raised his right hand, made the sign of the cross, and in slow solemn tones pronounced the Latin words of Absolution. Before he had finished the words a short spasm shook the old man's body as if something had broken inside him. His breathing ceased; he was dead.

On turning round I saw a sight more painful than the poor old chap's last moments. The three old women were huddled together, making hideous grimaces in their panic terror. I moved towards them and they started screaming shrilly and tried to run away as if I was going to kill them too. Mother Jean-Jean, whose burnt leg could not support her weight, fell full length on the floor.

Sister Saint-Benoît, leaving the body, ran to her charges and without a word or a glance at me threw their shawls round them and handed them their crutches; then she hustled them towards the door, shepherded them out, and disappeared with them into the darkness of the night.

I realized that I couldn't even send a Hussar with them to see them home, for the mere rattle of a sabre would have terrified them to death.

The priest kept his eyes on the dead man. At last he turned to me: 'War is a very ugly thing!' was all he said.

A CORSICAN BANDIT

THE road sloped gently upwards through the Forest of Aitône. Huge pines spread overhead a whispering vaulted roof, from which came a continuous plaintive murmur, while to right and left the slender straight trunks looked like an array of organ pipes, which seemed to relay the monotonous music of the wind in the tree-tops.

After we had been walking for three hours, the mass of tall stems began to thin; here and there a towering umbrella-pine, standing by itself like a gigantic open parasol, raised its dark green dome. Then suddenly we reached the edge of the forest about three hundred feet below the pass leading to the wild Niolo valley.

A few gnarled old trees seemed to have struggled up the two sharp peaks dominating the defile, like scouts thrown out in front of the main body following in close order. Turning round, we saw the whole extent of the forest spread out below us like a huge green basin, the rim of which, consisting of bare rock all round, seemed to tower up to the sky.

We continued our way and ten minutes later reached the pass, where an astonishing view met our gaze.

On the far side of another wood lay a valley such as I had never seen, a rocky gorge thirty miles long carved out between mountains 6,000 feet high, without a cultivated field or a tree visible. It was Niolo, the home of Corsican freedom, an impregnable citadel, from which no invader has ever been able to drive the mountaineers who dwell there.

My companion remarked: 'This is the place of refuge of all our bandits.'

Soon we were at the bottom of the wild gorge, a place of incredible beauty. There was not a blade of grass or a plant to be seen, just granite and nothing else. As far as we could see stretched bare, gleaming granite, heated like an oven by the blazing sun which

seems poised over the rocky gorge just for this purpose. As one gazes up at the crests of the hills, one stops, dazzled and amazed; they look red and jagged like festoons of coral, for all the tops are porphyry; and the sky above them is mauve and purple, as if discoloured by these strange peaks. Lower down the granite is sparkling grey and underfoot it is as if it had been ground and crushed in a mortar; the path was gleaming dust. On our right a raging torrent roared, running in a narrow winding bed. One staggers along in the heat and glare in this wild, barren, stifling valley; down the centre runs the deep bed of the turbulent stream, which seems eager to escape, unable to make these rocks fertile, losing itself in this furnace, which absorbs it greedily without ever being watered and freshened.

Suddenly on our right we noticed a little wooden cross stuck up in a heap of stones. A man had been killed there and I said to my companion: 'Do tell me some stories about your bandits!'

He replied: 'I knew the most famous of them all, the terrible Sainte-Lucie; I'll tell you his story.'

'His father had been killed in a quarrel by a young man of the same village, it was said; and Sainte-Lucie was left alone with his sister. He was a weakly timid boy, undersized and often ailing, with no vitality. He did not swear a vendetta against his father's murderer. All his relations went to him and begged him to avenge his father, but he would not listen to either threats or prayers.

'So, following the old Corsican custom, his sister angrily took away from him his black clothes, so that he should not wear mourning for a dead man who remained unavenged. Even this insult made no impression on him, and, rather than take down from its nail his father's still loaded gun, he shut himself up and never went out, not daring to face the contemptuous glances of the young men of the neighbourhood.

'Months passed; he seemed to have even forgotten the crime and lived with his sister immured in his cottage.

'One day the man suspected of the murder was being married.

The news appeared to have no effect on Sainte-Lucie. But, as a gesture of defiance no doubt, the bridegroom, on his way to the church, passed in front of the house of the two orphans.

‘The brother and sister, at their window, were eating little pastry cakes, when the boy caught sight of the wedding procession passing in front of the house. Suddenly he began to tremble all over, got up without a word, crossed himself, took down the gun hanging over the fire-place, and went out.

‘Speaking of the matter later, he would say: “I don’t know what came over me; it was as if my blood began to boil. I knew I’d got to do it, that I couldn’t resist, do what I would. So I went and hid the gun in the ‘*maquis*’ on the road to Corte.”

‘An hour later he came back without the gun, looking depressed and tired as usual. His sister thought he had forgotten all about it. But at nightfall he disappeared.

‘His enemy was to walk to Corte with his two groomsmen. They were going along the road singing, when suddenly Sainte-Lucie sprang up in front of them and looking the murderer full in the eyes he shouted: “Your number’s up!” and at point blank range shot him in the chest.

‘One of the groomsmen ran away, the other looked at the young man and kept saying. “What have you done, Sainte-Lucie?”

‘Then he made as if to run to Corte and summon help, but Sainte-Lucie shouted at him: “If you move a step, I’ll put a bullet in your leg.” The man, knowing how timid he had always been, said: “You wouldn’t dare!” and walked past him. A moment later he fell with a bullet in his thigh.

‘Sainte-Lucie, going up to him, said: “I’ll look at the wound and, if it isn’t serious, I’ll leave you here; if it’s mortal, I’ll finish you off!” He examined the wound and considered it mortal; so he reloaded slowly, gave the man time to say a prayer and blew out his brains. Next day he had taken to the mountains.

‘And this is the sequel to the exploits of Sainte-Lucie.

‘The police arrested the whole family. His uncle, the priest, who

came under suspicion of having incited him to avenge his father, was himself imprisoned on the accusation of the dead man's relations. But he escaped, took a gun in his turn, and joined his nephew in the "*maquis*".

'After this Sainte-Lucie killed all his uncle's accusers, one after the other, and tore out their eyes to teach other people never to assert what they had not actually seen. He killed all the relations and connexions of his enemy's family. During his life he murdered fourteen police and set fire to the houses of his opponents, and until his death he was the most feared of all the bandits whose stories are remembered.'

The sun was setting behind Monte Cinto and the gigantic shadow of its granite mass was falling over the granite of the valley. We increased our pace in order to reach before nightfall the hamlet of Albertacce, which is just a heap of stones clinging to the rocky sides of the wild gorge. And I said, thinking of the bandit: 'What a terrible custom your vendetta is!'

My companion replied with an air of resignation: 'Well, what do you expect? One can only do one's duty!'

THE* WRECK

YESTERDAY, December 31st, I had been dining with my old friend, Georges Garin, when the servant brought him a letter covered with seals and foreign stamps. Georges said: 'Do you mind if I read it?'

'Of course not!'

He began to read, eight pages criss-crossed in a sprawling English hand. He read slowly and carefully with an attention that suggested some sentimental interest. At last he put the letter down on a corner of the chimney-piece and said: 'This letter recalls a curious incident, that I've never told you, an incident that genuinely moved me – and it's quite true. I had an odd New Year's Day that year. It must be twenty years ago, for I was thirty at the time and I'm fifty now.'

'In those days I was an inspector in the Maritime Insurance Company, of which I am Managing Director to-day. I was intending to spend the New Year holiday in Paris, for there is a general conspiracy to regard New Year's Day as a holiday, when I got a letter from the manager telling me to start at once for the Île de Ré, where a three-masted schooner from Saint-Nazaire, insured with us, had been wrecked. It was eight o'clock in the morning. I went to the office to get my instructions and that evening I caught the express which put me down at La Rochelle next morning, December 31st.'

'I had two hours to wait for the *Jean-Guiton*, the boat to the island; so I strolled round the town. La Rochelle is an unusual town, full of character, with its labyrinth of narrow alleys. The pavements run under interminable galleries, arcaded galleries like those in the Rue de Rivoli. The galleries and their arches are low and stunted, breathing mystery; they look as if they had been originally built, and had remained ever since, as hiding places for

conspirators. They are the striking setting of the wars of past ages, those wars of religion, so heroic and so pitiless. It is an old Huguenot town, unobtrusively solid, without any outstanding artistic gems like those wonderful monuments which are the glory of Rouen; but its whole appearance is stern with a suggestion too of cunning, a city of stubborn fighters, a home of fanatics, where the mystical faith of the Calvinists flourished and the conspiracy of the Three Sergeants* was hatched.

After wandering round these interesting streets for some time I went on board the little steamer, broad in the beam and dirty, which was to take me to the Île de Ré. She puffed asthmatically as she steamed between the two ancient towers guarding the harbour, crossed the roadstead and made her way out past the mole built by Richelieu, the huge stones of which can be seen at water level and which encircles the town like a great necklace; then she turned to the right.

'It was one of those thick heavy days, which stifle the brain and chill the heart and sap all strength and energy, a grey day, bitterly cold, under a pall of dense mist, as drenching as rain, icy, and poisonous to breathe like the fumes from a sewer.

'Under a ceiling of low, threatening fog, the muddy sea, quite shallow here and thick with sand from the miles of beaches, was flat calm; no movement, not a sign of life in the oily, soupy, stagnant water. The *Jean-Guiton* steamed along, rolling slightly from habit, cutting through the glassy, opaque sheet of water, leaving in her wake a few waves, a few splashes, a few undulations which soon disappeared.

'I began to chat with the skipper, a short man with practically no legs, as round as his ship with a roll like hers. I was anxious to get a few facts about the accident that I was going to investigate.

'A great square-rigged three-master from Saint-Nazaire, the

* These men were members of the 4th Regiment of the Line, affiliated to the Carbonari of Italy; they sought to spread revolutionary doctrines and were executed in Paris in 1822, where their tomb can still be seen.

Marie-Joseph, had run aground on a stormy night on the sands of the Île de Ré. "The hurricane had driven the ship so far up the sand," wrote the owner, "that it had been impossible to refloat her, and they had had to clear everything movable out of her as quickly as possible." My job was to investigate her condition before the stranding and decide whether adequate steps had been taken to refloat her. I was there as the company's agent in order to be able to correct from personal observation the owner's statements when the matter came into court. On receipt of my report the director would take such steps as he might consider necessary to safeguard our interests.

'The skipper of the *Jean-Guiton* knew all about the incident, having been called in, with his boat, to assist in the attempts at salvage.

'He told me what had happened. It was quite simple; the *Marie-Joseph* had been caught by a violent squall and had lost her bearings in the darkness in clouds of flying spray – "The sea had been like milk soup" was how the captain put it – and she had run aground on one of those huge sand-banks which at low tide make the coast hereabouts look like the Sahara desert.

'As we talked, I was looking round and ahead. Between the sea and the lowering sky there was a luminous streak visible on the horizon. I asked: "Is that the Île de Ré?"

"Yes, Sir."

'And suddenly the skipper, pointing straight ahead, showed me a speck only just distinguishable, surrounded by water, and said: "Look! There's your boat!"

"You mean the *Marie-Joseph*?"

"Yes, of course!"

'I was amazed. This almost invisible black speck, which I should have taken for a reef, appeared to me to be at least two miles from the shore. I went on: "But, Captain, there must be a hundred fathoms of water at the spot you indicate."

'He began to laugh: "A hundred fathoms, my dear Sir! Not two

fathoms, I assure you." He was a Bordeaux man and he continued: "It's just high water, 9.40. You go out for a walk on the sands with your hands in your pockets after lunch at the Dauphin Hotel, and I promise you that at 2.50 or three o'clock at latest you'll reach the wreck without getting your feet wet, my dear Sir. You can stay there for an hour and three-quarters or two hours – don't stay any longer or you'll be caught. The further the tide goes out, the faster it comes back. This coast is as flat as a bug. Start back at 4.50 – take my word for it. Then come aboard the *Jean-Guiton* at half past seven and you'll be on the quay at La Rochelle the same evening."

I thanked the captain and went and sat down in the fore-part of the ship to watch the little town of Saint-Martin, which we were rapidly approaching.

'It was just like the rest of the miniature harbours which serve as capitals to all the small islands scattered along the coasts of continents. It was a large fishing village, with one foot in the sea and one on land; it lived on fish and poultry, vegetables and shell-fish, radishes and mussels. The island is very low-lying with only a small area under cultivation but the population seems large; I did not, however, go any distance inland.

'After lunch I crossed a small headland and then, as the tide was going out fast, I set off across the sands towards a sort of black projection rising out of the water at some distance.

'I walked fast across the sandy flat, which was resilient like human flesh and seemed to exude moisture under foot. The sea had been there a moment earlier and now I saw it disappearing in the distance and I could no longer distinguish the line between sand and water. It was like being the spectator of some supernatural transformation scene on a gigantic scale. A moment before the Atlantic had been in front of me and now it had been swallowed up in the sand like scenery disappearing down a trap-door on the stage, and I was walking in the middle of a desert. All I could still detect was the tang of salt water in my nostrils. I could smell the sea-weed, the scent of the sea waves and the strong kindly tang of the land. I

walked fast and no longer felt cold, I kept my eyes on the wreck, which grew larger as I approached and now resembled a huge stranded whale.

'She seemed to be rising out of the ground, towering to a surprising height above the boundless sandy flat all round. After an hour's walk I reached her. She was lying on her side, burst open and shattered, her broken ribs of tarred wood were visible with huge nails sticking in them. The sand had already got into her, infiltrating through the cracks, it had gripped and mastered her and would never let her go. She now seemed rooted in the sand. The fore-part had sunk deep into the soft treacherous bank, while the stern stuck up and seemed to be raising to heaven a desperate cry for help, shouting the two words of her name, *Maru-Joseph*, painted white on the black timbers.

I climbed on to the corpse of the boat where the side was lowest and, reaching the deck, made my way inside her. The hatches had been stove in and let in light, which also penetrated through the holes in her sides, and I could dimly see long dark passages full of broken woodwork. There was nothing else in her except sand, which formed the floor of this tunnel of planking.

'I started to make notes on the condition of the boat. I had sat down on an empty broken cask and I was writing by the light from a big hole through which I could see the boundless expanse of beach. The cold and the loneliness sent a strange shiver through me from time to time and I stopped writing at intervals to listen to vague mysterious noises from the wreck, crabs were scratching the planking with their crooked claws and there were the sounds of the thousand tiny sea-creatures which had already found their way into this corpse, and also the low regular tap of the borer with its ceaseless gnawing, a grating sound like a gimlet boring into and devouring all the rotting woodwork.

'Suddenly I heard human voices quite close to me. I jumped up as if expecting to see a ghost. I genuinely believed for a moment that I was about to see the apparitions of two of the drowned men,

who would tell me the story of their death. It certainly did not take me long to pull myself up on to the deck. There I saw standing in front of the bows of the ship a tall gentleman with three girls, or rather a tall Englishman with three equally English daughters. They were certainly more frightened than I, when they saw a figure shoot up from below on the deserted ship. The youngest girl ran away; the two others clung tightly to their father, whose open mouth was his only sign of surprise. After a few seconds he said in atrocious French: "Are you the owner of this boat, Sir?"

' "Yes, Sir!"

' "Can I go over it?"

' "Certainly, Sir!"

'Then he spoke a long sentence in English, in which the only word I could make out was "gracious", several times repeated

'As he was looking for somewhere to climb on board, I showed him the best place and gave him a hand up, when he had clambered up, we helped the three girls, who had got over their fear, on to the deck. They were charming, especially the eldest, a fair girl of eighteen, with the dainty fresh loveliness of a flower.

'She spoke French a little better than her father and acted as interpreter. I had to give a detailed account of the shipwreck; I invented all the little details as if I had been there. After that the whole family made their way down into the bowels of the boat. As soon as they got down into the long dim passage, they uttered cries of astonishment and admiration; and in no time the father and the three girls had pulled out sketch-books from the pockets of their loose waterproofs and started to make pencil drawings of this strange grim place.

'They were sitting side by side on a projecting beam and the four sketch-books supported on eight knees were soon covered with little black lines meant to represent the gaping hold of the *Marie-Joseph*.

'As they worked, the eldest of the girls kept up a conversation with me, while I continued my inspection of the skeleton of the boat.

'I discovered that they were spending the winter at Biarritz and had come to the Île de Ré on purpose to see this schooner buried in the sand. They had none of the usual English stand-offishness, these folk, they were just plain simple souls, a bit mad, belonging to the class of travellers from England whom one meets all over the world. The father was tall and spare, with a florid face framed in white whiskers, an animated sandwich in fact, just a slice of ham cut to the shape of a head between two pads of white hair. The lanky girls held themselves well, like young wading birds, and were slim like their father, except the eldest; all three were attractive, particularly the eldest. She had such an amusing way of speaking, telling stories, laughing, understanding or failing to understand, raising her eyes, which were as blue as the depths of the sea, to ask some question, pausing in her drawing to guess, going back to her work and saying "yes" or "no", that I could have stayed indefinitely listening to her and watching her. Suddenly she whispered: "I can hear something moving gently in the boat."

'I listened and immediately heard a low, mysterious, continuous sound. What could it be? I got up and went to look out of one of the holes in the side and uttered a loud cry. The tide had come back and we should be cut off in no time.

'We rushed on deck but it was already too late; the sea was all round us and the tide was running towards the shore with incredible speed. It was not running, it was gliding, creeping, spreading out like some gigantic ink-blot. As yet there were only a few inches of water over the sand, but the front line of the tide had already passed far beyond us in its imperceptible onward march.

'The Englishman was anxious to start back at once, but I restrained him; escape was no longer possible owing to the deep pools, which we had had to go round on our way out and into which we should have fallen on our way back.

'We felt a sudden chill of fear in our hearts. But the little English girl began to smile and said: "Now it's we who are shipwrecked!"

'I tried to smile but fear choked me, a cowardly overmastering

panic, as base and sneaking as the tide itself. I realized all at once the danger we were in and I wanted to shout for help; but there was no one to hear.

'The two younger English girls were clinging to their father, whose terrified gaze was fixed on the expanse of water all round. Night was falling as quickly as the water was rising, and the darkness was oppressive, damp and ice-cold. I said: "We can do nothing but stay on the boat."

'The Englishman replied: "No, I suppose not."

'We stayed where we were for a quarter of an hour, perhaps half an hour, I don't know how long it was, watching all round us the yellow water getting thicker, eddying, seething, as if it was disporting itself over the sands in its triumphant advance.

'One of the girls felt cold and it occurred to me we might go below again to shelter from the light but icy wind which was blowing upon us and pricking our faces.

'I peered down the hatchway. The boat was full of water; so we had to crouch against the stern timbers, which afforded some protection. It was now quite dark and we stayed there, pressed against each other, hemmed in by the darkness and the water. I felt the little English girl's shoulder shivering against mine, while her teeth chattered, but I was also conscious of the delicious warmth of her body through her clothes, a warmth as exciting to me as a kiss. We were not talking now, we stayed there, not moving, silent, crouching down like animals in a ditch during a storm. And yet in spite of everything, in spite of the darkness and the imminent danger, increasing every minute, I began to feel glad I was there; I welcomed the cold and the risk, I welcomed the long hours of darkness and anxiety on those shattered planks, because I was close to this lovely, fascinating girl.

'I wondered at the time at the strange sensation of happiness and content that I felt.

'Why was it? I can't explain. Was it because she was there? She, an unknown little English girl? I wasn't in love with her, I didn't

even know her, and yet my emotions were deeply stirred – I was her slave; I would gladly have sacrificed my life to save hers, quite irrationally. It is extraordinary how the proximity of a woman will unbalance any man. Is it the power of beauty which acts as a charm, the attraction of grace and youth which intoxicates us like wine?

‘Perhaps it is rather the magic touch of Love, that mysterious god, who is always seeking to unite all living creatures. He is eager to test his power as soon as he has brought a man and a woman face to face; he thrills the very depth of their being with emotion, an undefined, unconfessed emotion, as a gardener waters the earth to make the flowers grow.

‘The silence of the night was becoming terrifying, the silence of the sky, for we heard all round a low murmur, undefined but unceasing, the dull swish of the rising tide and the monotonous splash of the waves against the sides of the boat.

‘Suddenly I heard sobs; the youngest of the English girls was crying. Her father tried to comfort her and they began to speak in their own language, which I could not follow. I guessed that he was trying to reassure her but that she was still frightened.

‘I asked the one next me: “You’re not too cold, I hope?”

‘“Oh! yes, I’m frozen!”

‘I offered her my coat and she refused it, but I had already taken it off and I put it round her in spite of her refusal.

‘For some minutes the air had been getting colder and the splash of the waves against the side louder. I stood up and a strong gust buffeted me in the face. The wind was rising.

‘The Englishman noticed it too and he said simply: “This is a poor look-out for us.”

‘It certainly was a poor look-out; it was certain death if waves, even small waves, broke upon the wreck and shook her; she was so shattered and weakened that the first waves of any size would pound her to match-wood.

‘Our anxiety increased every minute as the squalls increased in violence. The waves were now curling over and in the darkness I

saw white lines of foam appearing and disappearing, while each breaker buffeted the shell of the *Marie-Joseph* and made her shift with a shuddering shock which made our hearts stop beating.

'In the distance ahead to right and left the lighthouses were winking on the coast, white, yellow, and red, revolving like the huge eyes of some giant watching us and waiting eagerly for us to disappear. One of them in particular annoyed me; every thirty seconds it went out and immediately lighted up again; it was exactly like an eye, winking an eyelid over a fiery stare.

'At intervals the Englishman struck a match to look at the time and then put his watch back in his pocket. Suddenly he said to me with magnificent gravity over the heads of his daughters: "A happy New Year to you, Sir!"

'It was midnight. I held out my hand and he shook it; presently he said something in English and he and his daughters immediately broke into "*God save the Queen*", the notes soaring up into the dark silent air and fading away into space.

'My first reaction was a desire to laugh, but almost at once the singing evoked in me a strange but powerful emotion.

'There was something sinister and at the same time inspiring in this song of people condemned to death by shipwreck, a sort of prayer and something even finer like the sublime cry of the Roman gladiators: "Hail, Caesar, those about to die salute thee!"

'When they had finished, I asked the girl next me to sing some ballad or folk-song, anything she liked, to make us forget our anxiety. She consented and immediately her fresh young voice soared aloft into the night. The song, no doubt, was something sad, for the notes were long drawn out; they came from her lips slowly and fluttered like wounded birds over the waves.

'The sea was rising and now the waves were beating against our wreck; but I could think of nothing but her voice. It reminded me of the Sirens. If a boat had passed near us, what would the sailors have imagined? My anxious thoughts wandered off into dreamland. A Siren? Surely she was really a Siren, this daughter of the sea, who

was the cause of my staying on this mouldering wreck and who would soon be engulfed together with me in the waves.

'Suddenly all five of us were flung down the deck as the *Marie-Joseph* settled on her right side. The English girl had fallen on top of me and I had clasped her tight in my arms and, without realizing what I was doing, thinking my last hour had come, I was kissing her cheek, her forehead, her hair passionately. The boat ceased to roll and she and I stayed where we were.

'Her father shouted: "Kate", and from my arms she answered: "Yes!" and made a movement to disengage herself. At that moment I wished the boat would split in two so that I might fall into the water with her.

' "It was certainly a bit of a roll," went on the Englishman, "but I've got all my daughters safe anyhow!" Not seeing the eldest, he had thought she had gone overboard.

'I got up slowly and all at once I saw a light quite close on the sea. I shouted and an answer came back. It was a boat looking for us, the hotel-keeper having anticipated our folly.

'We were saved. I was seriously disappointed! They took us off our wreck and brought us back to Saint-Martin. Back in the hotel, the Englishman murmured, rubbing his hands: "Now for a good meal!"

'We did have supper, but I wasn't feeling a bit festive; I wished we were still on the *Marie-Joseph*!

'We had to part next morning after affectionate farewells and promises to write. They set off for Biarritz and I very nearly followed them.

'I was quite crazy and I was ready to ask the girl to marry me. If we had a week together, I'm sure I should have married her. Sometimes a man is unaccountably weak!

'It was two years before I heard of them. Then I got a letter from her from New York to tell me she was married. Since that time we have written to each other for every New Year's Day. She speaks of her life and her children but never says a word about her

husband. I often wonder why. And I only talk about the *Marie-Joseph*. Perhaps she is the only woman I have ever loved . . . no, whom I might have loved . . . But I wonder . . . one gets carried away by things . . . Nothing lasts for ever . . . And by now she must be an old woman . . . I shouldn't recognize her . . . But the girl on the wreck long ago . . . How adorable she was! . . . She tells me her hair is quite white . . . and that hurts, it was golden once . . . No, the girl of my dreams is no more . . . What a depressing thought!

THE DROWNED MAN

I

EVERYONE in Fecamp knew old Mother Patin's story. Her married life had certainly not been happy, for her husband, while he was alive, used to thrash her as they thrash corn in a barn.

He was skipper of a fishing-boat and he had married her years ago, because she was pretty, though poor. A good sailor but a bully, he used to go regularly to old Auban's public house, where on ordinary days he would have four or five glasses of brandy and, when he had had luck with his fishing, eight or ten or even more, to be in keeping with his good spirits, as he put it.

The customers were served with their drinks by Father Auban's daughter, a pretty dark girl, who attracted people to the house by her looks alone, for there was no scandal talked about her.

When Patin went into the bar first, he was satisfied with just looking at her and making a few polite remarks, as any man with decent manners would do. After his first glass he thought her even more attractive, after the second he winked at her; after the third he would say 'What about it, Mam'zelle Désirée . . . ' without ever finishing the sentence. At the fourth glass he tried to catch hold of her skirt and kiss her. When he got up to number ten, Daddy Auban served the rest himself.

The old publican, who knew all the tricks of the trade, sent Désirée to walk about among the tables in order to stimulate business, and Désirée, who was not her father's daughter for nothing, swung her skirt among the drinkers and joked with them with a smile and a sly glance.

As a result of all these brandies, Patin got so used to seeing Désirée about that he thought of her even at sea, when he was casting his nets far from land, whether the night was windy or calm, when the moon was shining and when it was pitch dark. He

thought of her when he was at the tiller in the stern, while his four deck hands were drowsing with their heads on their arms. He could not forget her smile as she poured the amber liquid into his glass with a movement of her shoulder and then stepped back, saying: "There! How's that?"

By dint of always picturing her and thinking of her, he finally wanted to marry her so badly that he just had to propose.

He was well off; he owned his own boat, his nets, and a house under the cliff on The Dam, while old Auban had nothing. His proposal was eagerly accepted and the wedding took place as soon as possible, both parties being equally anxious to have the thing settled, though for different reasons.

But three days after the wedding Patin could not conceive how he had ever thought Désirée different from other women.

He must indeed have been a fool to encumber himself with a penniless chit who had got round him with her brandy – yes, he was sure she must have drugged the spirit to entrap him!

Out fishing he swore all the time, broke his pipe between his teeth, and bullied his men; and, after damning and blasting everything that got in his way with all the richness of his vocabulary, he vented what remained of his bad temper on the fish and the lobsters as they were taken out of the nets one by one; he could not pitch them into the baskets without an accompaniment of oaths and foul language.

When he got home and his wife was within reach of his voice and hand, he wasted no time before calling Father Auban's daughter every bad name he could think of. When she listened to it all patiently, being accustomed to rough handling from her father, he lost his temper at her unruffled demeanour. One evening he thrashed her and after that her life at home became hell.

For ten years no one on The Dam talked of anything but the way Patin beat his wife and swore at her whenever he opened his mouth. His fluency in blaspheming was all his own; no one else in Fécamp could compete with the richness of his vocabulary and the

loudness of his bass voice. As soon as his boat appeared at the entrance of the harbour returning from fishing, everyone waited for the first volley of abuse which he was sure to discharge from the deck at his wife on the quay, as soon as he caught sight of her white cap.

Standing up in the stern he steered the boat in with his eye on the bow and the sail when the sea was rough, and, in spite of the tricky channel and the mountainous waves sweeping into the narrow passage, he tried to pick out among the women waiting for the sailors in clouds of spray his own wife, old Auban's daughter, the slut!

As soon as he sighted her, in spite of the din of wind and waves, he loosed off at her such a flood of profanity with the full force of his powerful lungs that everybody laughed, though they were genuinely sorry for her. When the boat reached the quay he had his way of unloading his cargo of compliments, as he called it, while he landed his fish, so that he attracted round his moorings all the bad characters and out-of-works in the port.

His language issued from his mouth sometimes like cannon shots, short and formidable, sometimes like the rumblings of thunder lasting five minutes; there was such a tornado of swear words that his lungs seemed to contain all the hurricanes of the Almighty.

When he landed and found himself face to face with his wife, surrounded by an interested crowd of fish-wives, he brought up from the hold a whole fresh cargo of abuse and foul language, and so took her back to their house, she in front and he following, she crying and he shouting.

When the door was shut and he was alone with her, he cuffed her on the slightest excuse. Any pretext was good enough for him to raise his hand and, when he once started, nothing stopped him; he spat out in her face the real motive of his hate. At each box-on-the-ears, at each blow he screamed: 'You penniless beggar! You destitute good-for-nothing! I did for myself properly the day I

first washed out my mouth with that vile muck your rascally father sold me.'

She lived now, poor woman, in perpetual fear; her spirit was broken and she was in continual terror of being beaten, always expecting insults and physical violence.

This went on for ten years. She got so nervous that she turned pale when she spoke to anyone; she was always expecting a thrashing and she became thinner, yellower, more dried up than a kipper.

II

One night when her husband was at sea she was suddenly woken up by that animal growl which a storm makes when it is coming up like a hound unleashed. She sat up in bed frightened, but hearing nothing more she lay down again; however, almost immediately there was a roar in the chimney which shook the whole house, and the tumult spread all over the sky as if a herd of mad bulls were charging through the air, snuffling and bellowing.

She got up and ran to the harbour. Other women were coming the same way with lanterns. Men were hastening up too and everyone kept his eyes fixed on the white lines of foam on the crests of the waves out at sea in the darkness.

The storm lasted fifteen hours. Eleven sailors failed to return, among them Patin.

The wreckage of his boat, the *Jeune-Amélie*, was found in the direction of Dieppe. They brought back to Saint-Valéry the bodies of his crew, but his body was never found. As the hull of his boat seemed to have been cut in two, his wife waited anxiously for his return; for, if there had been a collision, it was possible that the ship which had fouled the *Jeune-Amélie* might have picked him up without the others and taken him to some distant port.

But gradually she got used to the idea that she was a widow, though she started every time a neighbour, a beggar, or a pedlar came into her house unexpectedly.

One afternoon about four years after her husband's disappearance, she was walking along Jewry Street and stopped in front of the house of an old sea-captain, recently dead, whose effects were being sold. Just at that moment there was up for auction a parrot, green with a blue head, which glared at everyone with an irritable, nervous expression.

'Three francs!' cried the auctioneer, 'for a bird that can talk like a lawyer — only three francs!'

A friend of the widow Patin nudged her elbow: 'You ought to buy it, you can afford it,' she said. 'It'll be company for you; that bird's worth more than thirty francs. You can sell it again easily for twenty or twenty-five francs.'

'Four francs, ladies, only four francs!' repeated the man. 'It can chant Vespers and preach like the parson. It's something out of the ordinary, a real wonder bird!'

The widow Patin bid half a franc more and they handed her the bird with its hooked beak in a small cage, and she took it home.

She fixed up the cage in her house and, as she opened the wire door to give the creature something to drink, she got a nip on the finger which broke the skin and drew blood.

'What a bad-tempered bird!' she cried.

However, she gave it some hemp-seed and maize and left it preening its feathers, examining its new home and its new mistress with a sly look.

It was just beginning to get light next morning when the widow Patin heard quite distinctly a voice, a loud resonant deep bass voice, her husband's voice, shouting: 'Get up, you lazy bag-of-bones!'

Her terror was such that she hid her head under the bed-clothes, for every morning in the old days, as soon as he opened his eyes, her late husband had shouted those seven words in her ear, so that she knew them by heart.

Trembling all over, she rolled herself into a ball and stiffened her

back in anticipation of the expected blow, and murmured, with her face still buried in the bed-clothes: 'Good God! it's 'imself! Good God! 'e's come back! Oh, my God!'

Minutes passed; not a sound broke the silence of the room, and, still shaking, she raised her head from under the clothes, certain that he was there, watching, ready to give her a clout. But she saw nothing except a ray of sunlight shining through the window, and she thought: "E must be 'iding, for sure!"

She waited some time, then gaining confidence she reflected: 'I s'pose I must 'ave been dreaming, as 'e don't show 'imself.'

Reassured, she closed her eyes again, when, quite close, the voice bellowed angrily again, like a clap of thunder, the voice of her drowned husband. 'Damn your eyes! Blast you! Won't you get up, you . . . !'

She leapt out of bed; the instinct to obey forced her up, the instinct of a woman who has been beaten and cannot forget the fact even after four years, who will never forget and always obey her master's voice. She said: "Ere I am, Patin; what d'you want?"

But there was no answer from Patin.

She glanced all round bewildered and searched everywhere, in the cupboards, up the chimney, under the bed, without finding anyone, and finally she collapsed on to a chair, distraught with anxiety, convinced that Patin's disembodied spirit was there, close to her, having come back to plague her.

Suddenly she remembered the loft, which was reached by an outside ladder. He must have hidden there in order to surprise her. He must have been prevented from escaping before and been kept prisoner by savages on some distant coast; and now he had returned in a worse temper than usual. She was sure of that from the mere tone of his voice. Looking up to the ceiling, she asked: 'Be you up top there, Patin?'

No answer from Patin. So she went out and in fear and trembling climbed up the ladder and opened the gable-window. She looked in

and saw nothing; then she went in and searched the place – there was nothing there. She sat down on a truss of straw and broke down; but, while she was sobbing in her panic terror of the supernatural, she heard Patin in her room down below talking quite naturally about this and that; he seemed calmer and less angry; he was saying: ‘Rotten weather! . . . Heavy wind! . . . Rotten weather! . . . Damn it all! I haven’t had any dinner!’

She shouted down through the floor: ‘I’m ’ere, Patin. I’ll get your soup; don’t fash yourself; I won’t be a jiffy!’

And she hurried down. There was no one in the house.

She felt faint as at the touch of the finger of death, and she was on the point of dashing out to beg help from the neighbours, when the voice quite close to her ear screamed: ‘Damn it all! I haven’t had any dinner!’

And there was the parrot in its cage watching her with its round, sly, mischievous eye. She looked at it, dumbfounded, murmuring: ‘Oh! So it was you!’

The bird went on, shaking its head: ‘You just wait and I’ll learn you to slack about, doing nothing!’

Something happened inside her; she felt in her bones with absolute certainty that it *was* the dead man come back, disguised under this bird’s feathers; he would begin all over again making her life intolerable, swearing all day long as he used to, taunting her, and shouting abuse to rouse the neighbours and make them laugh. Suddenly she rushed to open the cage and seized the bird, which to defend itself tore at her hands with beak and claws. But she gripped it with both hands and all her strength, and throwing herself on the ground rolled on it with the frenzy of one possessed and crushed it, till it was just a lifeless, flattened piece of flesh, a tiny little soft green thing, incapable of movement or speech, lying quite limp. Then, wrapping it up in a cloth like a shroud, she went out in her shift, bare-foot, crossed the quay, against which the sea was lapping in small waves; and, shaking out the cloth, she dropped the little dead thing looking like a wisp of grass into the water.

After that she went home, fell on her knees in front of the empty cage and, sobbing, overwrought by what she had done, prayed to the Almighty for forgiveness, as if she had committed a monstrous crime.

THE LITTLE CASK

FARMER CHICOT, the innkeeper at Épreville, pulled up his trap in front of old Mother Magloire's farm. He was forty, a fine figure of a man with a florid complexion and running to fat; he had a reputation for sharp practice.

He tied his horse to the gate-post and went into the yard. He owned the land adjoining the old woman's farm, which he had long coveted. Though he had tried twenty times to buy, Mother Magloire had always obstinately refused.

'Ere I were born an' 'ere I'll die,' she would say.

He found her peeling potatoes in front of the door. She was sixty-two, shrivelled, wrinkled, and bent, but like a girl she didn't know what it was to be tired. Chicot clapped her on the back in friendly fashion and sat down near her on a stool.

'Well, Mother, and how are we to-day? Flourishing, I hope, as usual!'

'Oh! not too bad, Mister Prosper; and 'ow's yourself?'

'A few aches and pains, otherwise I'm as right as rain.'

'That's good!'

She had no more to say. Chicot watched her as she got on with her job. Her crooked, gnarled fingers, horny as a crab's claws, picked up the greyish tubers from a trough like pincers, and she twirled them round rapidly, removing long strips of peel with the blade of an old knife held in the other hand. As soon as the potato showed yellow all over, she dropped it into a pail of water. Three hens ventured right up to her skirts one after the other to pick up the peelings and then scuttled away with their prize as fast as they could.

Chicot seemed worried, hesitant, anxious, as if he had something on the tip of his tongue which wouldn't come out. At last he took the plunge: 'Look here, Mother Magloire!'

'Well! What is it?'

'It's about the farm – do you still refuse to sell?'

'Aye, there's nought doin'. I've said so before, but you *will* keep comin' back to it.'

'The fact is, I've hit on a plan that'll suit us both.'

'Well, what is it?'

'It's this way; you sell it to me but you keep it all the same. You don't understand, let me explain.'

The old woman stopped peeling the potatoes and fixed her beady eyes under their wrinkled lids on the innkeeper, who went on 'What about this? I give you a hundred and fifty francs a month – you realize what that means: every month I bring you in my trap thirty five-franc pieces. And everything goes on just as before, no change at all. You keep your cottage and don't worry about me, you don't owe me anything. All you do is to get my money. How does that appeal to you?'

He looked at her with a good-humoured smile. The old woman gazed at him mistrustfully, trying to find the snag; she asked 'Aye, that's what I gets out of it, but it don't get you the farm, do it?'

He went on: 'Don't you worry about that. You stay here as long as the Almighty lets you. All you do is to sign a bit of paper at the lawyer's, so that it'll come to me when you're gone. You've got no kids, only nephews you're not over fond of. What about it? You keep the place for your life and I pay you thirty five-franc pieces a month. It's all pure profit for you.'

The old woman was still surprised and worried but sorely tempted, she replied 'I don't say no, but I must 'ave time to think it over. Come next week an' we'll talk again an' I'll give you an answer.'

Farmer Chicot went away as pleased as a king who has won an empire.

Mother Magloire did a lot of thinking and didn't sleep at all the following night. For four days she was in a fever of indecision. She suspected a catch somewhere but the thought of one hundred and

fifty francs a month, solid silver francs, falling into her apron like rain from heaven without any effort on her part, made her mouth water.

Finally she went to the lawyer and told her story. He advised her to accept the offer but to demand two hundred and fifty francs a month instead of one hundred and fifty – her farm was worth at least sixty thousand francs.

If you live fifteen years he'll only be paying forty-five thousand francs,' the lawyer insisted.

The old woman was thrilled at the prospect of two hundred and fifty francs a month, but she was still mistrustful, afraid of countless unforeseen developments and hidden deceptions. She kept on thinking over the problem all day, unable to make up her mind to go to the lawyer and sign. But at last she instructed him to draw up the conveyance and went home as muddled in the head as if she had drunk four mugs of new cider.

When Chicot came for her answer she refused to give it for some time, saying she didn't really want to do it, but with the gnawing fear that he wouldn't agree to pay the two hundred and fifty francs. In the end, in answer to his repeated demands, she stated her terms.

He started with disappointment and refused. To convince him, she began to argue about her prospect of life.

'You see, I shan't last more than five or six years. I'm rising sixty-three an' not strong at that. A few nights back I reckoned I were for it; I felt I were being drained dry an' I 'ad to be carried to bed.'

But Chicot wasn't to be caught: 'Come, come, you old rogue, you're as solid as the church tower; you'll go on to a hundred and ten at least. I bet you'll be at my funeral!'

They spent the whole day arguing, but the old woman stuck to her guns and in the end the innkeeper agreed to pay two hundred and fifty francs a month. The deed was signed next day and Mother Magloire demanded fifty francs as luck-money.

Three years passed and the old woman was the picture of health. She didn't look a day older and Chicot was in despair. He felt as if he had been paying out for half a century; he had been deceived, swindled, robbed! From time to time he visited the old woman, as one goes to the fields on a farm in July to see if the corn is ripe for the sickle. She received him with a knowing look, as if congratulating herself on the way she had diddled him. And he hurried back to his trap, murmuring: 'You'll never peg out, you miserable old bag-of-bones!'

There was nothing he could do, though he would dearly have liked to strangle her at sight. He hated her with the passionate but cunning hatred of a peasant who has been robbed. Then an idea occurred to him.

One day he came to see her, rubbing his hands, as he had done on the day when he first suggested the deal. After chatting for a few minutes he went on: 'Look here, my good woman, why don't you come and have dinner with me at my place, when you're in Épreville? People are talking; they say we are no longer friends, and that hurts me. It won't cost you anything, I can afford to stand you a meal. When you feel like it, just drop in; I should like it so much!'

Mother Magloire didn't wait to be asked twice, and two days later, on her way to market in her cart driven by her paid hand, Célestin, she calmly stabled the horse at Farmer Chicot's place and claimed the proffered meal.

The innkeeper, all smiles, treated her like a lady, gave her chicken, blood sausage, chitterlings, leg of mutton, and bubble and squeak. But she didn't eat very much, having been used to a scanty diet from childhood; she had always lived on a little soup and a buttered crust of bread.

Chicot, disappointed, pressed her, but she wouldn't drink either, even refusing coffee. He asked: 'But you *will* have a glass of something after dinner, won't you?'

'Well, I don't mind if I do!'

He shouted at the top of his voice through the inn: 'Rosalie, bring the brandy, the best, the Three Star!'

The maid appeared with a slender bottle, with a paper vine-leaf as a label.

He filled two liqueur glasses: 'You taste this, Mother; it's real good stuff!'

The good woman sipped the liquor slowly, to prolong the pleasure. She drained the glass to the very last drop.

'Aye, that be the real thing, that be!'

The words were not out of her mouth before Chicot had poured her out a second glass. She meant to refuse but she was too late, and she savoured the brandy slowly as she had done the first glass.

He tried to make her take a third but she refused. He pressed her: 'It's as soft as milk, that is. I take ten or a dozen without any ill effect. It goes down sweetly like sugar. It doesn't affect the stomach or the head, it seems to evaporate on the tongue and there's nothing better for the health.'

She wanted another glass and gave way, but she only drank half.

Then in a burst of generosity Chicot cried: 'Look here! As you like it, let me give you a little cask of it, just to show we're good friends.'

She didn't refuse and went away slightly drunk.

Next day the innkeeper drove into Mother Magloire's yard and pulled out from the bottom of his trap a small iron-bound barrel. He insisted on her sampling the contents to prove that it was the same brandy. When they had both had three glasses, he declared as he drove off: 'And then, you know, when that's finished, there's always another cask waiting for you. Don't be shy about it - I don't grudge it. The sooner that's finished, the better I shall be pleased.' And he climbed into his trap.

He returned four days later. The old woman was standing at her door busy cutting up bread for her soup.

He went up to her and said good morning, putting his face close to hers in order to smell her breath. He detected a whiff of alcohol

and said with a smile: 'You'll give me a glass of brandy, won't you?'

They clinked glasses two or three times.

Soon all the neighbours were saying that Mother Magloire was boozing all by herself. They picked her up, sometimes in her kitchen, sometimes in the yard, sometimes on the roads near by, and they had to carry her home dead drunk.

Chicot didn't go to her house any more, and, when people talked to him about the old peasant woman, he looked sad and murmured. 'A pity at her age, isn't it, to have taken to drink! But, when one gets old, one hasn't many pleasures. I'm afraid some day she'll come to a bad end.'

In fact, she did come to a bad end. She died the following winter about Christmas time, having fallen down drunk in the snow.

Farmer Chicot inherited the farm, declaring 'If the old thing hadn't taken to the bottle, she'd have lived another ten years.'

MADemoisELLE PEARL

I

It was an odd whim of mine to choose Mlle Pearl as queen that evening.

Every year I go to celebrate Twelfth-Night at my old friend Chantal's house. My father was a great pal of his and used to take me there as a child. I have kept up the habit and shall no doubt go on all my life and as long as there is a Chantal left in the world.

Besides, the Chantals live a curious life, in Paris they behave just as if they were at Grasse, Yvetot, or Pont-à-Mousson.

They have got a house in a small garden not far from the Observatory and they live there exactly as if they were in the country. They don't know Paris, the real Paris, a little bit; they might be miles away.

But from time to time they make an expedition there and it's a regular journey. Mme Chantal goes to replenish her stocks, as they say in the family, and this is what happens.

Mlle Pearl keeps the keys of the cupboards in the kitchen – the mistress herself has charge of the linen-cupboards. Mlle Pearl warns Mme Chantal that sugar is getting low, the preserves are finished, and there isn't much left at the bottom of the coffee sack. Thus warned of the danger of famine, Mme Chantal examines what is left, scribbling memoranda in a note-book. Next, after putting down columns of figures, she first does complicated sums and then has a long discussion with Mlle Pearl. Finally agreement is reached and the quantities of everything needed for the next three months are decided, sugar, rice, prunes, coffee, jam, tinned peas and beans, lobster, salt or smoked fish, and so on.

After this the date for the shopping expedition is fixed and the journey is made in a cab with a luggage rack to a big grocer south of the river in the new part of the town.

Mme Chantal and Mlle Pearl set out together like conspirators and do not get back till dinner-time, still excited but worn out with the jolting of the cab, whose top is loaded with parcels and sacks like a furniture van.

The Chantals consider the whole of Paris across the Seine as the new part, where strange people live, rowdy and not quite respectable, who pass the day in expensive amusements and the night in dissipation, spending money in all kinds of extravagance. From time to time, however, they take their girls to the theatre, the Opéra-Comique or the Français, when the piece is recommended by M. Chantal's paper. The girls are now nineteen and seventeen; they are both good-looking, tall and attractive, very well brought up, indeed too well, so that they pass unnoticed like two pretty dolls. It would never occur to me to pay any attention to the Chantal girls or flirt with them; one hardly dares speak to them, they are so very pure; indeed it almost seems an impertinence to take off one's hat to them.

The father is a delightful man, well educated, sincere and friendly, but his one aim in life is peace and quiet, and he is largely responsible for the mummification of his family in the pursuit of his ideal of tranquillity. He is a great reader and a good talker, though apt to be sentimental. His sheltered life, away from ordinary contacts and the rough and tumble of the world, has made him very sensitive and he is easily shocked; the least thing upsets him, worrying him and giving him pain.

But the Chantals have friends, confined to a small circle, carefully chosen, among their neighbours. Two or three times a year they pay visits to relations in the country.

I always dine at their house on the Feast of the Assumption in August and on Twelfth-Night; it is part of my regular duties like Easter Communion for a Catholic. On August 15th there are always a few friends to dinner but I am the only outsider asked for Twelfth-Night.

II

So this year I had gone to dinner as usual at the Chantals' to keep Twelfth-Night.

I greeted M. and Mme Chantal and Mlle Pearl with the customary kiss and the two girls, Louise and Pauline, with a low bow. They plied me with questions about everything, society gossip and politics, what people were thinking about the position in Tongking and in Parliament. Mme Chantal, a portly matron, whose ideas always seem to me square like paving-stones, invariably ends any political discussion with the phrase: 'All this is a bad omen for the future.' Why do I think of Mme Chantal's ideas as square? I've no conception, but everything she says assumes that shape in my mind, a great ponderous square with four equal angles. There are other people whose ideas seem round like running hoops; as soon as they begin speaking on any topic, out pop their ideas, big and little ones, like balls, ten, twenty, fifty of them, and I see ~~them~~ rolling away, one after the other, towards the horizon. Other people's ideas again are sharp like pins. But this is a digression.

We sat down to dinner as usual and the meal passed without any conversation of interest. During dessert the Kings' cake was brought in. Now every year M. Chantal became king. I don't know if it was just chance year after year or if it was a family conspiracy; but the bean was always found in his slice and he always proclaimed Mme Chantal queen. So I was amazed when I felt something very hard, on which I nearly broke a tooth, in my portion of cake. I took it gingerly out of my mouth and found it was a tiny china doll, no bigger than a broad bean. I uttered an exclamation of surprise. Everyone looked at me and Chantal cried, clapping his hands. 'Gaston has got it! Long live the King! Long live the King!'

They all took up the cry. I blushed up to the ears, as one often does for no reason at all, when one feels rather a fool. I remained with my eyes on the ground, holding the scrap of china between my

finger and thumb with a forced laugh, not knowing what to do or say, when Chantal went on: 'Now you must choose your Queen!'

I was flabbergasted. A thousand ideas and fancies flashed across my mind. Was the purpose to make me choose one of the girls? Was it a way to make me show which I preferred? Was it gentle pressure by the parents, tactfully concealed, towards possible marriage? In a family with grown-up daughters the idea of marriage is never far away; it assumes many forms, many disguises, many shapes. I was desperately afraid of compromising myself, and the correctness and propriety of the attitude of the two girls made me horribly shy. To choose one at the expense of the other seemed to me as difficult as to make up my mind between two drops of water. Moreover, I was dreadfully worried by the fear of embarking on a path which might lead me into matrimony against my will, as the result of gentle pressure and manoeuvres as discreet and unavoidable as my present imaginary kingship.

Suddenly I had an inspiration and I offered the symbolic doll to Mlle Pearl. At first everyone was surprised; then, no doubt as a mark of appreciation of my delicacy and discretion, there was loud applause and cries of 'Long live the Queen! Long live the Queen!' As for the pathetic old maid, she was completely overcome; she trembled, dreadfully upset, and stammered: 'Oh, no! no! not me, please, not me!'

At that, for the first time in my life I looked at Mlle Pearl and wondered what her life-story was.

I was used to seeing her about the house, as one is used to old upholstered armchairs, which one has sat on since childhood without ever noticing them. One day, for some reason or other, because the chair catches a ray of sunlight, one suddenly exclaims: 'What an interesting piece of furniture!' and one realizes that the carving of the wood is the work of an artist and the embroidery something unusual. I had never noticed Mlle Pearl before.

She was just part of the Chantal household. But how did she get there? She was tall and thin and always in the background, but she

had personality. They treated her in friendly way, better than a daily help but not quite as a relation. I suddenly became aware of a lot of little things I had never registered before! Mme Chantal addressed her as 'Pearl', the girls as 'Mlle Pearl', while Chantal always called her just 'Mlle', with perhaps a hint of greater respect.

I began to look at her. How old was she? Forty? Yes, about forty. She wasn't old, but she was no longer quite young, I observed with surprise. The way she did her hair, her clothes, and jewellery were slightly ridiculous, but she wasn't ridiculous in herself; she had a simple natural charm, which she tried to hide. She was certainly an intriguing figure! How was it I had never studied her more closely? She did her hair in a grotesque style, with comic little old-fashioned ringlets; and under this hair, which reminded me of a statue of the Virgin, she had a broad placid forehead, lined with two deep wrinkles, which must have been caused by some great sorrow, and then two blue eyes, large and gentle; they were beautiful eyes, shy and timid, that had remained unsophisticated, registering a child's artless surprise and reflecting the emotions of youth in the soft tranquil glance of one who has also known trouble.

Every feature showed refinement and self-control; it was one of those faces whose expression has been softened without being worn or ravaged by the fatigues or violent emotions of life.

She had a lovely mouth and lovely teeth but she looked as if she was afraid to smile.

Suddenly I compared her with Mme Chantal. Mlle Pearl was undoubtedly better-looking, far better-looking, more refined, more distinguished, more dignified.

I was amazed at what I saw. Our glasses were filled with champagne. I handed my glass to the 'Queen' and proposed her health with a well-turned compliment. I saw she would have liked to hide her face in her napkin; then, as she sipped the sparkling wine, there was a shout: 'The Queen drinks! The Queen drinks!' She blushed

crimson and choked. Everyone laughed, but I saw they were all genuinely fond of her.

III

As soon as dinner was over, Chantal took my arm. It was the hour sacred to his cigar. When he was alone, he went out and smoked in the street. When there was someone to dinner, they went up to the billiard-room and he played, while he smoked. That evening a fire had been lit upstairs, because it was Twelfth-Night, and my old friend took his very light cue and chalked it carefully, saying 'It's you to break, my dear boy.'

Although I was twenty-five, he always called me that, having known me as a child.

So I began the game, making a few cannons and missing others. But I couldn't get the thought of Mlle Pearl out of my head, and I suddenly asked 'Tell me, M. Chantal, is Mlle Pearl a relation of yours?'

He was surprised at my question and stopped playing, looking at me. 'What? You don't mean to say you don't know Mlle Pearl's story?'

'No, I don't.'

'Didn't your father ever tell you?'

'No, never.'

'Well, I never, how odd! It's quite an interesting story.'

After a moment's silence he went on 'It's a curious coincidence that you should ask me about it on Twelfth-Night.'

'Why?'

'Well! I'll tell you. It's forty-one years ago, forty-one years to-day, Twelfth-Night. At that time we were living at Rouy-le-Tois on the Remparts. But I must explain first about the house or you won't understand. Rouy is built on a hill or rather a hummock, with a view over a broad stretch of fields. We had a house there with a nice hanging garden, supported by the old fortress wall. So the house was in the town on a street, while the garden looked out

over the plain. There was a door out from the garden straight into the country at the bottom of a secret staircase in the thickness of the wall – the sort of thing one reads about in novels. A road ran past this door, which had a big bell, for the country folk used to deliver our food there to avoid the long way round.

‘You understand the geography, then? Well, that year on Twelfth-Night it had been snowing for a week; it might have been the end of the world. When we went on to the Ramparts and looked out over the country, our hearts froze at the sight of a huge expanse of icy plain, shining like glass. It was as if the Almighty had packed up the earth in cotton-wool to store it in the lumber-room of old worlds. It was a depressing sight, I can tell you.

‘At that time all the family were living together, a whole crowd of us; my father and mother, my uncle and aunt, my two brothers and four girl cousins; they were pretty girls – I married the youngest. Of all that lot only three of us are still alive, my wife and I and my sister-in-law, who lives at Marseilles. My goodness! it’s awful the way a family tree sheds its leaves; it makes me shudder to think of it. I was fifteen then and I’m fifty-six now.

‘Well, we were going to have our Twelfth-Night celebrations and everyone was very cheerful. We were all in the drawing-room waiting for dinner, when my eldest brother, Jacques, suddenly said: “There’s a dog been howling for the last ten minutes out there in the country, it must be some poor creature lost.”

‘The words were hardly out of his mouth when the bell at the garden-door rang. It sounded like a great church bell tolling. Everyone started. Father called the man-servant and told him to go and see what it was. We waited in dead silence, thinking of the snow-covered fields. When the man returned, he said he could see nothing. The dog went on howling without stopping, the sound always coming from the same direction.

‘We sat down to dinner but we were all a bit scared, especially the children. Everything went all right till the main course; then the bell rang again three times, three long loud peals, which made us

shiver to our finger-tips and took our breath away. We looked at each other, our forks raised, listening, seized by a kind of supernatural terror.

'At last mother spoke: "It's queer that they've waited such a long time before coming back. Don't go by yourself, Baptiste; one of the gentlemen will go with you."

'Uncle François got up, he was a regular giant, immensely proud of his strength and quite fearless. Father said to him. "Take a gun; one doesn't know what it may be." But he only armed himself with a stick and immediately went out with the servant.

'The rest of us stayed where we were, nervous and worried, not eating or speaking. Father tried to reassure us. "You'll see," he said, "it'll be some beggar or traveller lost in the snow. After ringing the first time, when he saw the door wasn't opened at once, he tried to find his way again and, failing to do so, he has come back."

'My uncle seemed to be away for an hour. At last he returned, swearing crossly: "Damn it all! there's nothing there - it must be some practical joke. Only this cursed dog howling a hundred yards away from the walls. If I'd had my gun, I'd have shot him to make him shut up."

'We went on with the meal but everyone was on edge. We felt that this wasn't the end, that something was going to happen, and the bell would ring again presently.

'And so it did just as the cake of the King was being cut. All the men jumped up together. Uncle François, who had had a good deal of champagne, swore he would go and kill *him*, so emphatically that my mother and aunt caught hold of him to stop him. Father kept quite calm; he was not very active, being a bit lame as the result of a fall from his horse; but he said he intended to see what it was and would go himself. My brothers, who were eighteen and twenty at the time, ran to fetch their guns; and as no one paid any attention to me, I seized a rook-rifle and prepared to join the expedition.

'We moved off at once. My father and my uncle went in front with Baptiste carrying a lantern, next came my brothers, Jacques

and Paul, and I brought up the rear, in spite of the entreaties of my mother, who remained at the door of the house with her sister and the girls.

'It had been snowing again the last hour and the trees were bending under the weight. The pines were draped in a dull white mantle like white pyramids or huge lumps of sugar. One could hardly distinguish the smaller bushes, ghostly in the half-light, through an opaque curtain of fine thick flakes. It was snowing so hard that one could only see ten yards ahead, but the lantern threw a streak of light in front of us. As we began to go down the winding stair in the thickness of the wall, I was genuinely terrified. I felt as if someone was walking just behind me, on the point of seizing me and carrying me off, I wanted to retreat but I didn't dare, as that would have meant going back alone through the garden.

'I heard the door out into the country being opened and my uncle beginning to swear again. "Blast his eyes! He's gone away again! Let me spot his shadow and I shan't miss the blighter!"

'It was useless to see the country or rather to know it was there in front, for one couldn't see anything, one was only aware of an endless curtain of snow, whether one looked up or down, in front, to right or left. My uncle went on: "Hark! There's the brute howling again! I'll show him I'm a marksman, that'll be some consolation."

'But my father, who was a kindly soul, replied. "We'd better go and find the poor beast, who must be starving. The wretched animal is calling for help, like a man in distress. Let's go and look for him!"

'So we made our way through the thick blanket of falling snow which filled the night air. As the shifting, floating mass of flakes fell, they melted and produced an immediate burning sensation, exquisitely painful, on the skin at every touch.

'We sank up to the knees in the soft icy slush and we had to lift our legs high at every step. As we advanced, the barking of the dog came to us louder and more clearly. My uncle shouted 'There he is!' We all halted to look, as one does when one meets an enemy in the dark.

'At first I could see nothing; then, coming up to the others, I caught sight of him. He was a terrifying fantastic sight, a great black sheep-dog, shaggy-haired with a wolf's head, standing erect on four legs, at the end of the shaft of light cast by the lantern over the snow. He didn't move or make a sound; he just looked up at us.

'My uncle said: "It's very odd; he doesn't come forward or go back. I'd like to put a shot in him!" But Father replied firmly: "No! We must catch him." My brother added: "And he's not by himself; he's got something beside him!"

'There was, in fact, something behind him, something grey, which we couldn't see properly. We went forward again cautiously. When he saw us getting near, the dog sat down. He didn't look fierce; indeed he seemed pleased to have attracted attention.

'Father went straight up to him and stroked him. The dog licked his hand. We then noticed that he was tied to the wheel of a small vehicle, a sort of toy cart, swathed in three or four blankets. These were carefully loosened and, as Baptiste held the lantern to the door of the little baby-carriage, which was like a nest on wheels, we saw an infant inside asleep.

'We were so dumbfounded that no one said a word. Father was the first to recover himself and, being a kindly soft-hearted soul, he laid his hand on the roof of the little cart and said: "Poor foundling! You shall be one of the family!" And he told my brother Jacques to wheel the carriage we had found in front of us. He went on, thinking aloud: "No doubt it's some love-child, whose poor mother came to-night, Twelfth-Night, and rang at my door, thinking of the Infant Christ."

'He stopped and shouted through the darkness as loud as he could towards the four points of the compass: "We've taken the child in!" And laying his hand on his brother's shoulder, he whispered: "What would you have done, if you had shot the dog, François?"

'My uncle did not answer but in the darkness he piously crossed

himself, for in spite of his swashbuckling manner he was a very devout man.

'The dog had been untied and was following us.

'Our return home was a sight for sore eyes, I can tell you! At first we had great difficulty in getting the baby-carriage up the winding staircase but we managed it in the end and pushed it along to the front door and inside.

'What a fuss Mother made over it, delighted and at the same time frightened! And my four little girl cousins – the youngest was only six – clucked round like four hens round a nest. At last they took the baby out, still asleep. It was a girl about six weeks old. In the wrappings we found ten thousand francs in gold, yes, ten thousand francs, which Father invested to provide her dowry later. So she wasn't the child of poor parents after all, but perhaps some aristocrat's baby by a lower class girl or perhaps . . . we made a thousand guesses but we never found anything out for certain, nothing at all. No one even recognized the dog, which wasn't known in the district. But in any case, whoever it was who rang at our door, whether father or mother, must have known my parents to have picked on them.

'That was how Mlle Pearl made her entrance into our house at the age of six weeks. She only acquired the name of "Mlle Pearl" much later. She was first christened "Marie Simone Claire", it being intended that she should be called "Claire".

'It was a strange procession back to the dining-room, I assure you, with the infant, now awake, looking round with clouded blue eyes at all the people and the lights.

'We sat down again and the cake was passed round. I was King and I named Mlle Pearl as Queen, just as you did to-night. But that evening she was entirely unconscious of the honour being done her!

'So the child was adopted and brought up as one of the family. She grew up and the years passed. She was a charming child, well-mannered and obedient. Everybody was fond of her and she would have been badly spoilt, if Mother hadn't prevented it.

'Mother believed in the social conventions and well-marked class distinctions. She was quite ready to treat the small Claire like her own children, but she insisted on the difference between us being clearly recognized and our respective positions being admitted.

'Accordingly, as soon as the child was old enough to understand, she told her her past history and made her realize, speaking kindly, even tenderly, that she was only the adopted daughter of the Chantals, a foundling and definitely not one of themselves.

'Claire showed unusual intelligence in appreciating her position, as it were by instinct; and she was able to take and keep the place allotted to her with so much tact, charm, and grace that Father was touched almost to tears.

'Mother herself was so moved by the affectionate gratitude and the almost timid devotion of this sweet gentle creature that she took to calling her "My child!" Sometimes, when the girl had been particularly kind and tactful, Mother would push up her spectacles on to her forehead, always an indication of emotion with her, and say over and over again: "But this child is a pearl, a real pearl!" And the name stuck to little Claire, who became and remained for us all *Mlle Pearl*.'

IV

M. Chantal fell silent. He was sitting on the edge of the billiard-table, swinging his legs and playing with one of the balls in his left hand, while with his right he crumpled the duster, which we used to rub out the scores on the slate and called the chalk-duster. His face was rather red and his voice low; he was now talking to himself, lost in memories, recalling sentimentally the happenings of long ago, which came crowding back to his mind. It was like strolling about in the old garden of the family home, where one was brought up and where every tree, every path, every flower, the prickly holly-bushes, the scented laurels, the yews whose sticky red berries you crushed in the fingers, bring back at every step some

trivial incident of the past, one of those unimportant delightful incidents which form the very stuff and pattern of our life.

I was standing facing him, with my back against the wall and my hands on the top of my idle cue. After a short pause, he went on: 'My goodness! how lovely she was at eighteen, graceful, a perfect picture! Yes, she was lovely, lovely . . . and a good girl too, so straightforward, a real charmer! And what eyes she had . . . blue, clear, sparkling eyes . . . I've never seen eyes like hers, never!'

He fell silent again. I asked: 'Why did she never marry?'

He didn't answer my question, but the word 'marry' caught his attention. 'Ah! Why, why indeed? She refused to, she wouldn't. And she had a dowry of thirty thousand francs and she had several proposals . . . but she always refused. In those days she seemed sad. It was the time when I married my cousin, little Charlotte, my wife, to whom I had been engaged six years.'

I was gazing at M. Chantal and I seemed to be looking right into his soul, when I suddenly realized I was witnessing one of those cruel tragedies of two humble hearts, honest, innocent hearts, which even the mute, resigned victims do not understand or recognize.

Under the spur of sudden curiosity I said: 'It was you who ought to have married her, wasn't it?'

He started, looked at me, and murmured: 'I, marry who?'

'Mlle Pearl!'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because you loved her more than your cousin.'

He gazed at me wide-eyed with a strange frightened expression and stammered: 'I loved her? What do you mean? Who told you I loved her?'

'Good Heavens! It's as plain as a pikestaff! It was because of her that you refused for so long to marry your cousin, who had been waiting for you for six years.'

He suddenly dropped the ball out of his left hand, seized the chalk-duster in both hands, and hiding his face in it began to sob.

There was something pathetic and ridiculous in his tears, which ran out of his eyes and nose and mouth at the same time like water out of a squeezed sponge. He coughed, cleared his throat, blew his nose on the chalk-duster, wiped his eyes, and sneezed; his tears began to run out of all the openings in his face and a gurgling sound came from his throat.

I felt ashamed and frightened and wanted to run away; I was powerless and didn't know what to do or say.

All at once Mme Chantal's voice called up the stairs: 'Will your cigar soon be finished?'

I opened the door and called down: 'Yes, Marlane, we're just coming down!' Then I ran to her husband and seizing him by the arm cried: 'M. Chantal, my old friend, listen! Your wife's calling you, pull yourself together, man; we've got to go down, pull yourself together!'

He stammered: 'All right . . . I'm coming . . . Poor girl! . . . I won't be a minute . . . tell her I'm coming.'

And he set to work conscientiously, mopping his face with the duster which had been used to clean the slate for two or three years. Presently he appeared with half his face white and half red; his nose, forehead, cheeks, and chin were smeared with chalk and his eyes swollen and still wet with tears.

I seized his hand and dragged him to his bedroom, murmuring: 'I'm so sorry, M. Chantal, so very sorry to have caused you pain . . . but I had no idea . . . you understand that.'

He wrung my hand: 'Yes . . . Yes . . . Things are very difficult sometimes!' With that he plunged his face into his basin. When he took it out I still didn't think he was presentable, but I perpetrated a pious fraud. As he was getting worried looking at himself in the glass, I said to him: 'It'll be all right if we tell them you've got a speck of dust in your eye; then you can cry in front of them all as much as you like.'

So he came downstairs rubbing his eyes with his handkerchief. Everyone expressed concern and insisted on looking for the speck

of dust, which, of course, could not be found. Cases of the kind were quoted, where a doctor had had to be called in.

I joined Mlle Pearl and looked at her with an eager curiosity that was positively painful. She must have been very pretty with her gentle expression; her eyes were so large and placid that it looked as if she never shut them like other people. Her clothes were slightly ridiculous, a regular old maid's get-up, in spite of which she st'ill looked attractive.

I felt I was looking into her soul as I had into M. Chantal's and was getting a bird's-eye view of the whole of her devoted life of simple duty. But I couldn't resist asking a crucial question in order to find out if she had been in love with him too, and if she had endured the sharp, long-drawn-out, hidden agony, that no one knows or guesses but which finds an outlet at night in the solitude of a dark bedroom. As I watched her, I saw that her heart was beating violently under her tight bodice, and I wondered if this sweet open-faced girl groaned every night on a tear-soaked pillow, while her body was shaken with sobs as she wept feverishly under the blankets.

So I said in a whisper, as children will break a toy just to see what is inside: 'If you had seen M. Chantal weeping just now you would have been sorry for him.'

She started: 'What do you mean? He was crying?'

'Yes, he was weeping bitterly.'

'Why was he doing that?'

She seemed very much upset. I replied: 'You were the cause!'

'I was the cause!'

'Yes, he was telling me how much he had loved you years ago, and what it had cost him to marry his wife instead of you.'

Her face seemed to lengthen; her calm eyes, which were still open, suddenly closed, so quickly that I thought they would never open again. She slid from her chair on to the floor and collapsed, slowly, gently, like a dropped scarf. I shouted: 'Help! Help! Mlle Pearl isn't well!'

Mme Chantal and her daughters rushed in and, while they were getting water, a napkin, and some vinegar, I seized my hat and disappeared.

I walked away quickly, deeply moved, full of remorse and regrets. But at intervals I was pleased too; I felt that what I had done was praiseworthy, indeed necessary. I asked myself: 'Was I wrong or was I right?' They both had something festering in their souls like a bullet in a wound skinned over. Won't they be happier now? It was too late for their agony to start again and not too late for them to remember their love.

Perhaps one evening next spring, under the magic of the moonlight shining through the branches on the grass under their feet, they will hold hands and remember their cruel pain so long crushed down; perhaps too this brief caress will stir in their blood something of the thrill they would never have known and afford them, like the dead recalled to life for a moment, the fleeting intoxication of that madness, which gives lovers more divine happiness in a flash than others get out of their whole life.

THE BLIND MAN

WHY is there such a thrill in the first summer sun? What is there in the sunlight pouring down that makes us so glad to be alive? The sky is all blue, the countryside all green, the houses all white; the sight of these brilliant colours charms the eye and fills the heart with joy. We want to dance and run and sing, our thoughts are happy, we are at peace with the world, and we could kiss the sun.

But the blind at our gates, prisoners of a life-long darkness, are insensible to all this new gaiety and, not understanding, they try to check their dogs' high spirits.

On the way home in the evening, led by a younger brother or small sister, if the child says: 'What a gorgeous day it's been!' the blind man replies: 'Yes, I knew it had been a fine day; Loulou wouldn't keep quiet.'

I knew one of these men who was the victim of unimaginable cruelty all through his life.

He was a peasant, the son of a Normandy farmer. During the life-time of his father and mother he was fairly well looked after. His dreadful infirmity was all he had to endure. But, as soon as the old parents were dead, his life became hell. A sister took him in, but everyone about the farm treated him as a beggar and grudged him his food. At every meal they reproached him for what he ate, calling him a good-for-nothing wastrel. And, although his brother-in-law had got hold of what ought to have come to him from his parents, they only unwillingly gave him just enough soup to keep him alive.

His face was deathly pale with his two staring blank eyes like two sealing wafers; he showed no resentment at this treatment, so shut up in himself that you could not tell if he felt it. Moreover, he had never known love, as his mother had not been fond of him and had always been rough with him; for on a farm those who

cannot work are a liability and peasants would really like to behave like hens and kill off the weaklings.

As soon as he had swallowed his soup he would go and sit in front of the door in summer and in the chimney-corner in winter, and he never stirred till evening, without a gesture or movement, only his eyelids from time to time closed over the blank whites of his eyes with a kind of nervous twitch. Had he any mind, any power of thought, any clear realization of what his life was like? No one ever asked the question.

Things went on like this for several years. But his utter helplessness as much as his stolid indifference to everything got on the nerves of his family in the end, and he became a butt, a sort of patient fool, the victim of the natural cruelty and vulgar witticisms of the coarse peasants all round him.

They played on him all the unkind practical jokes which his blindness invited. And in order to compensate themselves for what he ate, they used meal times as an opportunity for amusement for all those about the place, regardless of the blind man's suffering.

The peasants from the houses near would come in for this entertainment, the news was passed on from door to door and the farm kitchen was crowded every day. Sometimes they put a cat or a dog on the table in front of his plate as he began to drink his soup. The animal, whose instinct enabled it to sense the man's infirmity, would come quietly up to the plate and eat and lap without a sound. If it roused the poor chap's attention by making too much noise as it ate, it retired wisely out of reach of a blow from the spoon aimed blindly at it.

Then the audience crowded against the wall roared with laughter, nudged each other, and stamped, while he without a word went on eating with his right hand, while he waved his left to guard and defend his plate. Sometimes they put bits of cork or wood or filth in his food, knowing he could not detect it.

At last they got tired even of this sport, and the brother-in-law in his annoyance at having to feed him used to hit him and box his

ears, laughing at his impotent attempts to parry or return the blows. This started a new slapping game. The ploughboys, the apprentice, and the farm girls were always smacking his face, which made him blink. He didn't know where to hide and stood there with his arms extended to prevent any one from getting near him.

Finally they forced him to go out begging. They stationed him on the roads on market days and, as soon as he heard footsteps or the wheels of a cart, he held out his hat, stammering: 'Spare a copper for the poor beggar!' But generosity is not a peasant characteristic and for whole weeks on end he did not bring home a penny, which roused a furious, pitiless hatred against him.

This is how he died. One winter the ground was covered with snow and it was freezing hard. His brother-in-law took him one morning a long way along one of the main roads to make him beg there. He left him all day and, when night had fallen, he told his people he had not been able to find him, adding: 'Damn it all! It doesn't matter; I expect somebody has taken him off because he got cold. I swear he's not lost; he'll turn up again to-morrow in time for his dinner.'

But he did not come back next day.

After standing there for hours in the bitter cold, realizing that he was dying, the blind man had started to walk. Unable to keep to the road buried under its covering of frozen snow, he had wandered about, not knowing where he was going, stumbling into ditches and struggling up again without uttering a word, searching for a house.

He was gradually numbed by the cold and his legs failed under him. He sat down in the middle of an open space and never got up again. The snow, continuing to fall, buried him; his limbs stiffened and he disappeared from sight under a drift. There was nothing to show where his body lay.

His relatives made a show of looking for him and the search was kept up for a week; they even put on mourning for him.

It was a hard winter and the thaw was long in coming. One

Sunday on the way to Mass the farmers noticed a flight of crows wheeling round and round above a level piece of ground. Then they swooped down again and again in the same spot like a black cloud, rising into the air at intervals but always coming back again.

The following week the carrion birds were still there. The sky was black with them, as if they had come from all directions. They dropped cawing on to the dazzling snow, forming a great black patch and rooting busily.

A boy went across to see what they were doing and found the blind man's body, already half devoured and torn to pieces, his staring white eyes were already gone, pecked out by the long greedy beaks.

Since then I have never been able to enjoy the happy thrill of a sunny day without a sorrowful memory, I cannot help thinking sadly of that poor blind beggar, whose life had been so tragic that his horrible death came as a relief to all who had known him.

A PICNIC IN THE COUNTRY

THE idea of a picnic lunch in the country, not too far from Paris, had been mooted five months before; it was to take place on Mme Dufour's birthday – her Christian name was Petronilla. So, when the eagerly awaited day arrived, everyone was up early.

M. Dufour had borrowed the milkman's cart and was driving himself; it was a very smart two-wheeled trap and it had a tilt on four iron rods with curtains attached, which were rolled up so as not to obstruct the view of the countryside. Only the one at the back was left loose, to flap in the wind like a flag. Madame, by her husband's side, was a striking figure in a bright pink silk dress; behind them on two chairs sat an aged grandmother and their daughter. There was also visible the tow hair of a boy, who for want of anywhere to sit was lying on the floor with only his head showing.

After going up the Avenue des Champs-Élysées and crossing the line of the ramparts at the Maillot Gate, they settled down to admire the country. When they reached Neuilly Bridge, M. Dufour remarked: 'Now we're really in the country,' and his wife took this as the signal to wax sentimental over the beauties of nature.

At the Courbevoie round-about their admiration was aroused by the extent of the view before them. Away on the right lay Argenteuil with its lofty tower and behind it rose the hills of Sannois and Orgemont Mill. On the left the Marly aqueduct was silhouetted against the bright morning sky and in the distance the ridge of Saint-Germain could be seen, while in front at the foot of the rising ground earth-works marked the site of the new fort of Cormeilles. In the extreme distance very far away above the flat country with its villages, the dark green of forests was dimly visible.

The sun was beginning to grow uncomfortably hot and dust was always getting into the eyes, on both sides of the face, and the

less stretch of dirty, uncultivated, smelly country. It looked as though it had been attacked by leprosy, which had eaten away even the houses, for the skeletons of buildings, wrecked and abandoned, or little sticks, left uncompleted because the contractors could not get their money, stuck up with roofless walls.

At intervals an outcrop of factory chimneys rose from the barren soil, the only crop that grew on this sour land, where the spring breeze wafted the scent of crude and stale oil, mixed with even more unpleasant smells. At last they crossed the Seine a second time, waving lyrical over the view from the bridge. The river was one dazzling sheet of light, mist drawn up by the sun was rising from it, and they were all conscious of a feeling of placid content and refreshment as they breathed a bracing pure air, not fouled with the black smoke of the factories or the fumes of the sewer.

A practical man told them that they were at Boulogne. He pulled up, and M. Dufour began to read aloud the attractive advertisement of a cheap country house. Poulin's Restaurant. Stewed and fried fish, private rooms, tubs, swings.

'Well, Mademoiselle Dufour, what about it?' It's up to you. His wife repeated the words. Poulin's Restaurant. Stewed and fried fish, private rooms, tubs, swings, and examined the building critically. It was a white-washed country inn, close to the road. Through the open door could be seen the polished zinc of the bar, in front of which two workmen in the Saturday suit were standing.

At last Mme Dufour made up her mind. 'Yes, it'll do — there's a lovely view too.' The trip drove into a big bare yard planted with tall trees, which stretched behind the inn and was only separated from the Seine by the tow-path.

They all alighted, the husband jumped down first and prepared to catch his wife, the step with its iron supports was somewhat set down, so that in order to reach it Mme Dufour could not help showing a good deal of her calf, whose earlier elegance was now obscured by rolls of fat extending downwards from her upper leg.

M. Dufour, already exhilarated by the country air, pinched her calf hard and then, getting hold of her under the arms, lowered her to the ground like a huge parcel.

She patted her silk dress to shake out the dust and looked round. She was a stout woman of thirty-six, somewhat overblown perhaps but not unattractive. She was breathing heavily, being very tightly laced, and the constriction of her corsets forced up the jelly-like mass of her ample bosom to meet her double chin.

After her the girl, putting her hand on her father's shoulder, jumped down lightly without assistance. The tow-haired boy had put his foot on the wheel and leapt down, and then helped M. Dufour to unload grandmother.

Next they took out the horse and tied it to a tree, and the trap tilted forward with the shafts resting on the ground. The men took off their coats and washed their hands in a pail of water, before rejoining the ladies, who had already settled themselves on the swings. Mlle Dufour was trying to swing by herself standing up, but she could not get up enough way. She was a pretty girl between eighteen and twenty, one of those girls who attract you violently when you meet them in the street, and leave you all day with vague longings and a pleasurable excitement of the senses. Tall and slim, with broad hips, she had a southern complexion, very large eyes, and jet-black hair. Her frock outlined the rounded firmness of her bust, which was further emphasized by the efforts she was making with her back-muscles to get the swing going. Her arms, raised above her head, were gripping the ropes so that her breasts were pushed gently up at each thrust. Her hat had blown off and fallen behind her and, as the swing gathered momentum, every downward sweep revealed her shapely leg up to the knee, and the swish of air from her skirts, more heady than the fumes of wine, struck the faces of the two men, who were watching her with a broad smile.

Seated on the other swing, Mme Dufour kept up a monotonous whine: 'Cyprian, come and give me a push; do come and give me a push, Cyprian!' At last he went over and, turning up his shirt-

sleeves as if in preparation for some really hard work, he managed with considerable difficulty to set his wife in motion.

Hanging desperately on to the ropes, she stuck her legs straight out to keep them off the ground, enjoying the sensation of giddiness induced by the movement of the swing. Her portly figure quivered and shook all the time like jelly on a dish. But, as she swung higher, she got more and more dizzy and terrified. As the swing swept downwards she uttered piercing cries, which attracted all the little boys of the place, and in front of her she was dimly aware of a row of grinning faces peering over the garden fence, convulsed with amusement.

A servant appeared and lunch was ordered. 'Fried river fish, stewed rabbit, salad, and a sweet,' announced Madame importantly. 'And bring two litres of draught wine and a bottle of claret,' added her husband. 'And we'll lunch on the grass,' went on the girl.

Grandmamma, growing sentimental over the hotel cat, had been wasting endearments on it for ten minutes in an attempt to catch it. The animal, no doubt really flattered by these attentions, kept quite close to the good lady's hand but refused to be caught and walked placidly round the trees, rubbing against them with tail erect and purring with pleasure.

'Look here!' cried the tow-haired youth, who was poking about the yard, 'here are some top-hole boats!' They all went to look. Under a little wooden shed were hanging two lovely racing skiffs, beautifully built and as carefully finished as the most expensive furniture. There they were, lying side by side like two tall girls, long, narrow in the beam, and highly varnished. The very sight of them made you long to glide over the water on a fine warm evening or bright morning in summer, skimming past flowery banks, where tall trees dip their branches in the water, where the whisper of the rushes never ceases and kingfishers dart about like flashes of blue lightning.

The whole family examined them, duly impressed. 'Yes, they're top-hole,' repeated M. Dufour sententiously, and he proceeded to

enumerate their points. He had rowed himself as a young man, he went on, indeed with an oar like that in his hand – and he went through the motions of rowing – he would take anyone on. He had beaten several Englishmen in the old days sculling at Joinville, and he made puns on the word ‘dames’ (ladies), the technical term for rowlocks, saying that of course oarsmen never went out without their ‘ladies’. In an eloquent peroration he declared himself ready to bet that in a boat like that he would cover fifteen miles in an hour with ease.

‘Lunch is ready,’ cried the waitress appearing at the entrance of the shed.

There was a general rush, but lo and behold! in the best place, which Mme Dufour had already mentally decided on for the meal, there were two young fellows settled at lunch. They were no doubt the owners of the two boats, for they were in rowing kit.

They were lolling about almost at full length in deck-chairs. Their faces were tanned by the sun and they were only wearing thin white cotton zephyrs, leaving bare their arms, which were as powerful as a blacksmith’s. They were two tough young men, heavily built but showing in every movement the athletic grace of limb due to exercise, so different from the misshapen bodies of men who do heavy manual work every day.

They exchanged a quick smile at the sight of the mother and an interested glance when the girl appeared. ‘Let’s give up our place,’ said one, ‘that’ll serve as an introduction.’ The other immediately got up and holding his cap, which was half red and half white, in his hand, he politely offered the ladies the only spot in the garden which was out of the sun. The offer was gratefully accepted. In order to make it a real country picnic the family settled themselves on the grass without tables or chairs.

The two young men carried their food a few yards away and went on with their meal.

The sight of their bare arms, which they couldn’t help showing all the time, made the girl feel a little awkward. She made a pretence

of turning away and not noticing them, while Mme Dufour, less shy, with a woman's natural curiosity, which perhaps had an element of sex in it, kept staring at them, no doubt comparing them regretfully with her husband's unsightly body.

She had flopped down and was sitting cross-legged like a tailor, and kept fidgeting all the time, insisting that ants were tickling her. M Dufour, annoyed by the presence and affability of the strangers, was trying to get comfortable without success, while the low-haired youth went on eating voraciously in silence.

'What a gorgeous day, Sir!' said the portly lady to one of the rowing men, in an effort to make some return for their politeness in giving up their place.

'Yes, indeed, Madame!' he replied 'Do you often come into the country?'

'Alas! only twice a year, for a breath of fresh air, and you, Sir?'

'I come here to sleep every night.'

'That must be delightful, isn't it?'

'Yes, indeed it is, Madame.'

And he described his everyday life in a way to make a powerful impression on shopkeepers, who long for the green grass they never see and yearn for a country walk, it roused the instinctive love of nature which haunts them all through the year behind the counter in the shop.

The girl, becoming sentimental, raised her eyes and gazed at the young man. M Dufour spoke for the first time 'Yes, that is life!' adding, 'A little more rabbit, Mother.'

No, thank you, dear!' She turned to the young men again and, pointing to their bare arms, said, 'Aren't you cold like that?'

They both burst out laughing and amazed the family with an account of prodigious feats of endurance, how they bathed when they were overhated and went for long rows in the night mists, and they banged on their chests till they rang like drums.

'Yes, you look strong enough,' commented the husband, who

said nothing more of how he had won races against English oarsmen in the old days.

The girl was now looking at them with searching sidelong glances. The tow-haired boy let some wine go down the wrong way and choked noisily, splashing the pink silk dress of his mistress, who lost her temper and called for water to get out the stain.

Meanwhile it was getting unbearably hot. The shimmering river reflected the heat like a furnace and the fumes of the wine were going to their heads. M. Dufour, who had a violent fit of hiccups, had undone his waistcoat and the top button of his trousers, while his wife, who had difficulty in breathing, was gradually unfastening her dress. The apprentice was nodding his mop of tow hair, at peace with the world and keeping his glass well filled. Grand-mamma, feeling slightly tipsy, was sitting up very stiffly, the picture of dignity. As for the girl, she showed no outward signs, but there was a faint glint in her eye and the dark skin of her cheeks was flushed a deeper pink.

The coffee finished them off. Somebody suggested a song and each sang a verse amid vociferous applause. They got to their feet uncertainly and, while the two women breathed heavily and felt giddy, the two men, now quite drunk, tried some gymnastics. Heavy, flabby, and red in the face, they hung awkwardly on the rings, unable to raise themselves; their shirts were continually on the point of coming out of their trousers and flapping in the wind like flags.

Meanwhile the two scullers had launched their skiffs and came back to suggest politely to the ladies an outing on the river.

'M. Dufour, may I go? Do let me!' shouted his wife across to her husband. He looked blankly at her, quite fuddled. Then the young fellow went up to him with two fishing-rods in his hand. The hope of catching a fish that springs eternal in every shopkeeper's breast made the old buffer's dull eyes shine at once; he gave his wife unconditional permission and settled himself in the shade of the bridge with his legs dangling over the water, by the

side of the tow-haired young man, who incontinently went to sleep.

One of the scullers sacrificed himself and took the mother. 'We'll go to the little wood on Englishman's Island,' he shouted as he pushed off.

The other boat moved more slowly. The rower was so occupied gazing at his passenger that he couldn't think of anything else and his emotions paralysed his arms.

The girl, sitting in the stern seat, was conscious of nothing but the pleasure of being on the water; she wasn't thinking of anything, her body seemed asleep and her mind a blank, as if mind and body were alike intoxicated. She was flushed and her breath came in short gasps. The dizziness induced by the wine, aggravated by the tropical heat shimmering all round, made the trees on the bank look as if they were bowing to her as she passed. An undefined yearning to enjoy life to the full made the blood course through her veins, stimulated by the power of the sun. She was alone, too, with the young man on the river in a world that was empty in the heat of the day; she knew he found her attractive; his very glance was a kiss and the warmth of his desire penetrated her being like the sun. They had nothing to say to each other and that increased their awkwardness all the more; so they just looked about them. At last with a great effort he asked her name.

'Henriette!' she answered.

'That's odd! Mine's Henril'

When the silence was once broken they felt more at ease and examined the banks with interest. The other boat had stopped and seemed to be waiting for them. The sculler shouted: 'We'll see you later in the wood; we're going on to Robinson's, because Madame is thirsty.' And bending to his oars he went off at such a pace that they were soon out of sight.

A rumbling roar, getting rapidly closer, had been audible for some time. The river itself seemed to be groaning to its depths.

'What is that noise?' she asked. It was the overspill from the weir

which cut the river in two at one end of the island. The young man plunged into a long explanation, when through the roar of falling water a bird's song rang out in the distance.

'Listen!' he said, 'when nightingales sing in the daytime it means that the hen birds are sitting.'

A nightingale! She had never heard one, and the chance of listening to one conjured up in her mind the memory of the romantic sentiments of the poets. A nightingale! The invisible witness of many a lover's tryst, invoked by Juliet on her balcony, the heavenly music attuned to the loves of mankind, which has always inspired languorous romances, revealing a dream ideal of happiness to the simple little hearts of sentimental gals! At last she was going to hear a nightingale!

'Keep quite quiet,' said her companion, 'we'll stand in the wood and sit down near the bird.'

The boat sped on and the trees came into view on the island, whose bank was so low that one could look right into the thick undergrowth. They stopped and tied up, then they went forward through the trees, Henriette on Henri's arm. 'Look out for your head!' he said. She stooped and they made their way into an impenetrable tangle of creepers, foliage, and rushes, a safe hiding-place, which he wanted to show her and which he jokingly called his 'private room'.

Just overhead, perched on one of the trees which gave them shade, the bird was pouring forth a flood of melody. He uttered trills and scales, followed by deep vibrant low notes, which filled the air and died away in the far distance, echoing down the river and soaring away over the plain through the tropical heat, which brooded over the countryside.

They did not speak for fear of frightening the bird away. They were sitting close to each other, and gradually Henri's arm crept round Henriette's waist and gave it a gentle squeeze. Without taking offence she caught the daring hand and pushed it away several times when it tried to find its way back, accepting the caress without

embarrassment as entirely natural, just as it was natural for her to repulse the advance. She listened to the bird with a thrill of ecstasy. She was conscious of vague yearnings for happiness, sudden waves of tenderness sweeping over her, opening new magic casements on the realms of poetry and causing such a relaxation of nervous and emotional tension that her eyes filled with tears which she could not have explained.

Suddenly the nightingale fell silent. A voice in the distance called: 'Henriette!'

'Don't answer,' he whispered, 'or you'll frighten the bird away.' She had no intention of answering in any case. They stayed for some time where they were.

Mme Dufour was somewhere not far off, for from time to time little screams could be heard from the poorly lady, indicating that the young man was fluting with her. The girl was still weeping, a prey to disturbing but pleasurable emotions; she was flushed and conscious of a pricking, tingling sensation all over that she had never known before. Henri's head was resting on her shoulder and he suddenly kissed her on the lips; she reacted violently and in an effort to escape from his embrace she fell backwards; but he threw himself right on top of her. For a long time he tried to find her mouth which was avoiding his, and finding it at last he pressed his lips hard on hers. At this her feelings got the better of her and she returned his kiss, clutching him to her, and gave up the struggle against an emotion that was too strong for her.

Silence reigned all round and then the nightingale began to sing again. First he uttered three piercing notes like a love-call, then came a pause and his song ended in a dying fall. A gentle breeze sprang up, rustling the leaves, and from the depths of the foliage came two passionate sighs mingling with the nightingale's song and the soft whisper of the wood.

The bird was as it were drunk and his voice, gradually gathering speed like a kindling blaze or a mounting passion, provided an accompaniment to the sound of kisses beneath the tree. The

quivering rapture of his song swelled louder, his transports forming now a continuous stream of melody, now a few staccato notes. From time to time he paused after quite a short phrase ending on a very high note. Or he would start off on a mad cascade of sound with scales, trills, and isolated notes like some wild chorus hymeneal or shrill triumphal chant. Then he fell silent, listening to a sigh beneath him so deep that it might have been the last gasp of a departing spirit, which was prolonged for a time before ending in a sob.

They were both pale when they rose from their leafy bed. The blue sky seemed overcast, the blazing sun no longer dazzled their eyes; they were only conscious of being alone in the silence. They walked fast side by side, not speaking, not touching each other; they seemed to have become bitter enemies, as if a physical repulsion had been generated between their bodies and hatred in their hearts.

At intervals Henriette shouted: 'Mother!' There was a rustling in the undergrowth and Henriette thought she saw a white petticoat hurriedly pulled down to hide a stout leg; soon the portly lady appeared, looking somewhat embarrassed and still flushed, her eyes very bright and her breast heaving, perhaps rather too close to her companion. He must have seen some strange sights, for his face was convulsed with sudden fits of uncontrollable laughter.

Mme Dufour took his arm affectionately and they went back to the boats. Henri, who was walking in front by the girl's side, still silent, suddenly thought he heard the smack of a loud kiss quickly stifled. At last they got back to Bezons.

M. Dufour, no longer drunk, was getting impatient. The tow-haired youth was having a last snack before leaving the hotel. The horse had been put to and the trap was standing in the yard, grand-mamma had already taken her seat and was getting worried because she was afraid they would be benighted out in the country, the neighbourhood of Paris not being very safe.

They shook hands and the Dufour family drove off. 'See you

again!' shouted the young men and were answered by a sigh and a sob.

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Two months later, as he was walking down the Rue des Martyrs, Henri saw over a shop door, 'Dufour, Ironmonger', and went in. The buxom lady, no slimmer than before, was leaning on the counter. They recognized each other at once, and after the formalities demanded by good manners he asked for news of the family.

'And how is Mlle Henriette?'

'Very well, thank you; she's married.'

'Oh! is she?'

He felt a pang of disappointment and added: 'Who to?'

'The young fellow who was with us, you remember; he's going to take on the business.'

'Oh yes! Of course!' He was going away with an undefined feeling of regret, but Mme Dufour called him back.

'What about your friend?' she enquired shyly.

'He's quite well.'

'Remember us to him – don't forget – and tell him to drop in if he's passing this way.' And she added with a fiery blush. 'Tell him I'd love to see him again!'

'Right-ho! I won't forget; good-bye!'

'Don't say good-bye – we'll be seeing you again!'

The following year one very hot Sunday all the details of his adventure, which Henri had never forgotten, suddenly came back to him so clearly and so pleasantly that he went back all by himself to their nest in the wood. As he made his way in, he was astounded to find her there, sitting pensively on the grass, while by her side, in his shirt-sleeves as before, the tow-haired young man was conscientiously snoring like a grampus. At the sight of Henri she went so pale that he thought she was going to faint. Then they began to talk quite naturally as if there had never been anything between them. But, as he was telling her that he was very fond of this spot

and often came there to rest on a Sunday, recalling happy memories of the past, she looked him straight in the eyes and said: 'I think of it, too, every night.'

'Come along, my dear,' interrupted her husband with a yawn, 'I think it's time we were moving.'

A FARM GIRL'S STORY

I

As the weather was very fine, the farm hands had spent less time than usual over their dinner and had gone back to the fields. Rose, the maid-servant, was left alone in the vast kitchen, where the embers of the fire were dying down on the hearth under the cauldron full of hot water, from which she drew from time to time for her washing up. She paused to look at two patches of light cast by the sun through the window on to the long table, in which the flaws in the glass were reflected.

Three of the boldest hens were searching for crumbs under the chairs. Smells from the yard and the hot reek of the cow-shed came in by the half-open door and in the sweltering mid-day silence the crowing of cocks could be heard.

When the girl had finished her job, wiped the table, cleaned up the fireplace, and arranged the plates on the tall dresser near the grandfather clock, which was ticking loudly and rhythmically in its wooden case, she drew a deep breath, a little oppressed as if she had a weight on her chest without knowing why. She looked at the walls of blackened clay and the smoke-stained beams of the ceiling, draped with cobwebs, pickled herrings, and strings of onions; then she sat down, affected by the old smells rising in the heat from the beaten earth floor, on which things had been spilt for so many years and left to dry. Mingled with these was the acrid tang of the milk standing in the cool to cream in the room near by. She really meant to settle down to sew but she had not the energy and went to get a breath of fresh air at the door.

There under the caress of the hot sun she felt a comforting sense of contentment stealing into her heart and penetrating her whole body.

A shimmering haze was rising from the dunghill in front of the

door. The hens were sprawling on it, lying on their side, scratching lazily with one leg in search of worms. Among them stood the cock, erect and proud. Every few minutes he singled out one and moved round her with a clucking invitation. The hen got up indifferently and placidly accepted his advances, bending her legs and supporting him on her wings. Afterwards she shook the dust out of her feathers and lay down again on the manure-heap, while the cock crowed, counting up his conquests, and from all the other yards the cocks answered him as if they were issuing love-challenges from farm to farm.

The servant girl watched them mechanically. Presently she raised her eyes and was dazzled by the glory of the apple-trees in bloom as white as powdered hair.

Suddenly a young foal, intoxicated with the joy of life, galloped past in front of her, twice he kicked the dirt he edged with trees, and pulled up sharp, looking back as if surprised to find himself alone.

The girl, too, was conscious of a desire to run, of the need of movement, and at the same time she wanted to relax and lie down at full length in the stifling air. She took a few steps undecidedly, closing her eyes, thrilled with a sense of animal well-being. Presently, very slowly, she went to collect eggs in the hen house, she found thirteen and took them in. When they were safely stored in the egg-board, the smells in the kitchen irritated her again and she went out and sat down on the grass.

The farmyard with its ring of trees seemed to be asleep. The long grass, in which yellow dandelions shone like lamps, was bright green with the verdure of spring. There was a circle of shade at the foot of the apple trees, and the thatched roofs of the farm buildings, on the top of which grew irises with sword-like leaves, were steaming a little as if the damp of the stables and barns had risen through the straw. The girl went to the open shed where the waggons and carts stood. In the deep ditch there was a great hole full of violets which scented the air and over the top of the bank a

view of the country beyond, a great flat plain with growing crops and small copses here and there, and, dotted about in the distance, groups of labourers, no bigger than dolls, and white horses like children's playthings pulling tiny toy ploughs and driven by dwarfs no bigger than Tom Thumb.

She went and fetched a truss of straw from a barn and threw it down in the ditch to sit on. But, finding this uncomfortable, she untied the binding, scattered the straw and lay down on her back with both her hands behind her head and her legs stretched out.

She closed her eyes, dozing peacefully in delightful indolence, and she was on the point of going right off to sleep when she felt the grasp of two arms round her breast and leapt up in a flash. It was Jacques, the farm boy, a strapping young Picard, who had been making love to her for some time. That day he was working in the sheep-pen and having seen her lie down in the shade he had come up on tiptoe, holding his breath, with eyes slung and wisps of straw in his hair.

He tried to kiss her, but she was as strong as he and boxed his ears, whereupon he slyly begged her pardon. After that they sat down side by side and had a friendly chat, they talked about the weather which was excellent for the harvest and of the good prospects for the year, they spoke of their master, a good chap, of the neighbours and the whole district, of themselves, their home village, their memories, and their parents whom they had left long ago, perhaps for ever. Thinking of this she became sentimental, while he, knowing what he wanted, moved closer and snuggled up to her, quivering with amorous longings. She said, 'I haven't seen mother for years and it's hard to be separated like that.' Her rapt gaze was fixed on the distance across all those miles to the village she had left, far, far away to the North.

Suddenly he seized her round the neck and kissed her again; but she hit him in the face with her clenched fist so hard that his nose began to bleed. He got up and went to lean his head against a tree-

trunk. Then, suddenly relenting and going up to him, she asked: 'Did it hurt?'

He burst into laughter – no, it was nothing; only she had got a bull's-eye! He murmured: 'You *are* a Tartar, and no mistake!'

And he looked at her in admiration, feeling quite a new respect and affection, the beginning of genuine love, for this magnificent figure of a woman.

When the bleeding stopped he suggested a stroll, fearing his companion's robust methods if they remained sitting side by side. Of her own accord she took his arm and they walked like an engaged couple in the evening under the trees. She said to him: 'It ain't right, Jacques, to think so badly of me.'

He protested – no, he didn't think badly of her, he was in love with her, that was all. She retorted: 'Look here, do you mean to marry me?'

He hesitated and gave her a sidelong glance, while she kept her dizzy eyes fixed on the distance in front of her. Her cheeks were red and plump; her ample bosom stood out under her loose print jacket, her lips were thick and moist, and her almost bare throat was dewed with drops of perspiration. He felt the old urge again and with his mouth close to her ear he whispered: 'Yes, I will!'

At that, throwing her arms round his neck, she gave him such a long kiss that they both became breathless.

From this moment began the age-old tale of love. They teased each other in corners, they made trysts in the moonlight under a hay-rick, they kicked each other under the table with their heavy nailed shoes till their shins were black and blue.

But gradually Jacques seemed to tire of her; he avoided her, hardly ever spoke to her, and tried not to be alone with her. She began to have doubts and got very depressed. After a while she realized that she was pregnant.

At first she was frightened but soon she got furiously angry, angrier every day, because she could not find him alone, so carefully did he avoid her.

At last one night when everyone was asleep at the farm, she went out noiselessly in her petticoat with bare feet, crossed the yard, and opened the door of the stable, where Jacques slept in a big box filled with straw above his horses. He pretended to snore when he heard her coming, but she climbed up to where he was and kneeling down close to him she shook him till he sat up. When he asked, 'What do you want?', she said with clenched teeth, trembling with anger, 'What do I want? I want you to marry me, as you promised.'

He began to laugh and replied, 'Oh well! If a man had to marry every girl he ought to, it just couldn't be done!'

But she caught him by the throat and pulled him down on his back, giving him no chance to escape from her fierce grip, and throttling him, she hissed in his ear, 'I'm going to have a baby, do you understand? I'm going to have a baby!'

He was gasping, nearly strangled, they remained there, the two of them, without movement or a word in the silence of the night, broken only by sound of the horse pulling straw from the manger rack and slowly chewing it.

When Jacques realized that she was the stronger of the two, he stammered, 'Well, as it's like that, I'll marry you.'

But she, no longer trusting his word insisted, 'Yes! And it once, too, you'll put up the banns.'

He replied, 'All right! I will.'

'Swear you will by Almighty God.'

After hesitating for a second or two, making the best of a bad job, he said, 'I swear by Almighty God.'

At that she loosened her grip and left him without a word. For several days she had no chance of speaking to him and, as she always found the stable locked now, she dared not rattle the door for fear of scandal.

Then one morning she saw a new farm hand at dinner and asked: 'Has Jacques left?'

The boy replied, 'Yes, I'm here in his place.'

She began to tremble so violently that she could not unhook the cooking-pot, and, when everybody had gone back to work, she went to her room and cried, burying her face in the bolster so as not to be heard.

During the day she tried to get information without arousing suspicion; but she was so obsessed by the thought of her misfortune that she imagined that everyone she asked was laughing ill-naturedly at her. Moreover, all that she found out was that he had gone right away from the neighbourhood.

II

After this her life became one continual torment. She did her work like a machine without thinking what she was doing; she had only one fixed idea in her head: 'Supposing people knew!' This permanent obsession rendered her so incapable of rational thought that she did not even look for means of avoiding the scandal which she felt approaching, getting nearer every day, inevitable and sure as death.

She got up every morning before the others and with stubborn persistence tried to see her waist in the small cracked glass she used to do her hair, desperately anxious to know if people would discover her condition that day. And during the day she was always pausing in her work to consider carefully if her swollen belly was not too noticeable under her apron.

Months passed. She hardly spoke at all now and, if she was asked a question, she did not take it in, dazed, with vacant eyes and trembling hands, so that her master said: 'My poor girl, you've got quite imbecile lately!'

At church she hid behind a pillar and did not dare to go to confession any more; she was afraid to meet the priest, crediting him with superhuman power to read thoughts. At meals when anyone looked in her direction, she felt faint with anxiety and she was always imagining that the cow-man, a precocious sly boy, whose bright eye never left her, had discovered her secret.

One morning the postman gave her a letter; she had never had one before and was so overcome that she had to sit down. Perhaps it was from him! But not being able to read she remained anxious and frightened before this sheet of paper covered with ink. She put it in her pocket, not daring to trust anyone with her secret; and she often paused in her work to gaze at the equally spaced lines with a signature at the end, vaguely imagining that the sense would suddenly become clear. At last, as she was going mad with impatience and anxiety, she went to the schoolmaster, who made her sit down and read:

‘My dear daughter, this is to tell you that I am very sadly. Our neighbour, Mister Dcntu, is writing for me to ask you to come if you can,

for your affectionate mother,

Césaire Dcntu, Schoolmaster.’

She went away without a word, but, as soon as she was alone, she collapsed on the side of the road, her legs giving way under her, and stayed there till dark.

When she got back, she told her bad news to the farmer, who let her go for as long as she liked, promising to get a dairy girl in to do her work and to take her back on her return.

Her mother was on the point of death and died the day she arrived. Next day Rose gave birth to a seven months’ child, a frightful little skeleton, skinny enough to give one the creeps; he seemed to be in pain all the time, clenching his piteous tiny hands, which were as bony as a crab’s claws. But he did not die. She told people that she was married but could not look after the child, and she left him with some neighbours who promised to take good care of him.

She went back but there rose up in her heart, so long bruised, the dawn of a new love for the weakly little creature she had left behind; and this love was in itself a new source of pain, that was

with her every hour, every minute she was separated from him. What was especially agonizing was her passionate desire to kiss him and crush him in her arms and feel the warmth of his little body against her skin. She could not sleep at night now and all day he was never out of her thoughts; in the evening when her work was over she would sit gazing into the fire like one whose thoughts are far away.

The *J* even began to gossip about her, making jokes about the lover they were sure she had; they wanted to know if he was rich and good-looking and tall, what date was fixed for the wedding and the christening. She often escaped to cry by herself, for these questions pricked her like needles.

To distract her mind from these worries she worked like a demon and, always thinking of the child, tried every means to save money for him. She determined to work so hard that they would have to raise her wages.

By degrees she took on more and more work and had one servant girl got rid of as redundant, for she was doing the work of two. She effected economies on bread, oil, and candles, on the grain that was being given too plentifully to the hens, and on the hay for the animals, where there was some waste. She showed herself as close with her master's money as if it had been her own, and by driving hard bargains, selling what went out from the farm at high prices and thwarting the wiles of the peasants when they offered their produce, she soon got complete charge of the sales and purchases, the assignment of work to the farm hands, and the ordering of the food; in a short time she became indispensable. She kept such a keen eye on everything round her that the farm prospered amazingly under her direction. Everyone for six miles round was talking about 'Farmer Vallin's servant', and the farmer was always saying: 'That girl's worth her weight in gold.'

But time went on and her wages remained the same; her slaving was accepted as merely the duty of a faithful servant, simply a proof of good will; and she began to think somewhat bitterly that, while

The farmer, thanks to her, was making two hundred and fifty or five hundred francs more a month, she was still getting her two hundred hundred francs a year, neither more nor less

and so decided to ask for a rise. Three times she went to the

She but when she faced him she talked of something else. She farmer, and of shyness in asking for money, as if it were something felt a shame of. At last one day, when the farmer was at dinner to be in the kitchen, she said with considerable embarrassment that alone wanted to speak to him particularly. He looked up in surprise, she with both hands on the table, his raised knife in one and a hunk of with the other, and gazed hard at the girl. Under his glance she bread confused and asked for a week to go home as she was not growing well. He immediately granted her request and, embarrassed feeling himself, added 'When you come back, I shall have something to him to you too.'

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III

The child was now nearly eight months old and she did not recognize him. He had become very pink, chubby, and dimpled all over, a little parcel of living fat. His fingers, kept apart by folds of flesh, moved gently with obvious pleasure. She fell upon him like a wild beast on its prey in a fierce transport of joy and kissed him so passionately that he started howling with fright. She began to cry, too, because he did not recognize her and held out his arms to his foster-mother as soon as he saw her.

But by the next day he had grown used to her and laughed when he caught sight of her. She carried him off into the country, running like a mad woman, holding him out at arm's length, and sat down in the shade of some trees. Then for the first time in her life she opened her heart, even though he did not understand, and told him her sorrows, her hard work, her worries and her hopes, and she tired him out with the violence of her caresses.

It gave her an extraordinary thrill to rub him all over with her

hards, bathe him and dress him, she even enjoyed cleaning up his baby messes, as if these intimate attentions were a proof of her motherhood. She could not take her eyes off him, always surprised to realize that he was hers, whispering to herself as she dandled him in her arms 'He's my own little darling, my very own!'

She sobbed all the way home to the farm and, as soon as she arrived, her master called her to his room. She went there, surprised and disturbed without knowing why.

He began 'Sit down there!'

She sat down and they remained for a few seconds side by side, both embarrassed, as peasants always are, not knowing what to do with their hands and avoiding each other's eye.

The farmer, a heavily built man of forty five, a widower twice over, cheerful and obstinate, showed a constraint unusual with him. At last he took the plunge and speaking rather vaguely and stammering a little, with his eyes fixed on the distant country, he said 'Rose, have you never thought of settling down?'

She went pale as a corpse. Seeing that she did not answer his question, he continued 'You're a good girl, steady, hard working, and a good manager. A wife like you would make any husband's fortune.'

She remained without a movement, with a dazed air, making no effort even to understand, her mind in a ferment as if faced by some great danger.

He waited for a moment and then went on 'Look! A farm without a mistress is no good, even with a servant like you.'

After that he fell silent, not knowing what to say, and Rose looked at him with the nervous glance of someone who finds himself confronted by an assassin and is ready to run away at his first movement. Finally, after five minutes he asked 'Well! What do you think about it?'

She replied sadly 'What, Master?'

He blurted out impatiently 'Damn it all! Marry me!'

She got up quickly but collapsed on her chair, where she stayed

motionless like someone who has received a shattering piece of bad news. At last the farmer lost patience: 'Now look here! What *do* you want?'

She gazed at him as if demented; suddenly tears sprang to her eyes and she repeated twice in a choked voice: 'I can't! I can't!'

'Why?' asked the man. 'Come! Don't be a fool! I'll give you till to-morrow to think it over.'

With that he hurried away, much relieved at having got through this embarrassing scene and not doubting that next day the girl would accept his proposal, which must have been a complete surprise to her; for him it was a good piece of business, because in this way he was getting permanent hold of a woman who would certainly bring him more advantage than the biggest dowry in the neighbourhood. There was no question in either of their minds of any misalliance, for in the country class-feeling does not exist; the farmer himself works alongside his man, who in his turn usually becomes a master, and maid-servants are always becoming farmers' wives without this making any difference in their life or habits.

That night Rose did not go to bed. She sat on the bed without even the strength to cry, she was so distraught. She stayed there in a daze; she was not conscious of her body, and her mind had disintegrated as if someone had shredded it with one of those instruments which carders use to tease the stuffing of a mattress.

Only now and then could she manage to collect fragments of ideas and she was terrified at the thought of what might happen.

Her panic increased and every time the great kitchen clock slowly struck the hours in the silence of the sleeping house she sweated with anxiety. Her brain became fogged, she had one nightmare after another, and her candle went out. Then delirium set in, the wild delirium of peasant folk, when they believe that fate has smitten them, a mad desire to get away, to escape, to run before the misfortune as a ship runs before a storm.

An owl hooted; she started, got up, ran her hands over her face and through her hair, felt herself all over and went downstairs as if

walking in her sleep. When she reached the yard, she crouched so as not to be seen by any prowling farm boy, for the moon, near its setting, lit up the fields brightly. Instead of opening the gate, she scrambled up the bank of the ditch and set out as soon as she saw the open country in front of her. She went straight ahead at a fast springy trot and from time to time uttered, quite unconsciously, a shrill cry. Her magnified shadow, moving along at her side, kept pace with her and now and then a night bird swooped round her head. The farm-yard dogs barked as they heard her pass; one of them leapt the ditch and chased her trying to bite her, but she turned on him screaming so wildly that the terrified animal fled to the shelter of his kennel and stopped barking.

Sometimes there was a young family of hares gambolling in a field, and, when the wild runner like some frenzied Diana approached, the timid beasts scuttled away. The leverets and the mother took cover in a furrow, while the father bolted at full speed, and one could see his loping shadow, the long ears erect, silhouetted against the setting moon, which was now sinking towards the distant sky-line and casting a slanting light over the flat country, like a huge lantern standing on the horizon.

The stars grew pale in the depths of the sky and a few birds were twittering; sunrise was not far off. The girl was panting with exhaustion and she stopped when the sun showed through the purple mists of dawn.

Her swollen feet refused to carry her further but she noticed a large pond, whose stagnant water glowed like blood in the crimson light of the sunrise, and she limped painfully across to it with her hand on her heart, in order to cool her legs in it.

She sat down on a tuft of grass, took off her heavy dusty shoes, removed her stockings, and plunged her blue calves in the still water, in which air-bubbles rose from time to time and burst.

A delicious cool feeling mounted from her heels to her throat and suddenly, as she gazed into the depths of the water, giddiness seized her, a mad desire to throw herself right in. Down there her

sufferings would be over, over for ever. She forgot her child; all she wanted was peace and the repose of everlasting sleep. So she got up and raising her arms waded two steps forward. She was now in up to her thighs and was on the point of plunging right in, when she felt a burning pricking sensation round her ankles and leapt back with a wild cry, for from her knees to her feet great black leeches were sucking her blood, swollen, glued to her flesh. She did not dare touch them and shrieked with terror. Her agonized cries attracted the attention of a peasant who was passing in the distance with his cart. He pulled the leeches off one by one, closed the wounds with grass, and took the girl back to her master's farm in his vehicle.

She was in bed for a fortnight and the morning she got up, as she was sitting by the door, the farmer suddenly came and stood in front of her. 'Well!' he said, 'it's agreed, isn't it?'

At first she said nothing, but, as he stayed there, fixing her with his obstinate gaze, she managed to say. 'No Master, I can't!'

At that he flared up. 'You can't, girl, you can't - and why not?'

She burst into tears and repeated 'I just can't!'

He stared at her and shouted. 'That means you've got a lover!'

She stammered, trembling with shame. 'P'raps I have.'

The man, as red as a turkey-cock, stuttered in his anger: 'Ah! so you admit it, you slut! And who is the blighter? Some penniless hobo, some starving tramp? Who is he? Out with it!'

As she did not answer, he raved on: 'Ah! you won't tell! I'll tell you, it's Jean Baudu.'

She cried 'Oh no! It's not him.'

'Then it's Pierre Martin.'

'Oh no, Master!'

And he ran through a list of the farm hands in the neighbourhood, while she persisted in her desperate denials, wiping her eyes on the corner of her blue apron. But he continued his probing with animal obstinacy, tearing at her heart to find out her secret, like a

shooting dog who will dig all day at a fox-earth to get at the beast he can scent at the bottom. Suddenly he cried: 'By God! It's Jacques, last year's boy! Everybody said he was sweet on you and you were engaged.'

Rose choked and a rush of blood flushed her face; her tears stopped, drying up on her cheeks like drops of water on red-hot iron. She cried: 'No! It's not him! It's not him!'

'Are you quite sure?' asked the distrustful peasant, who felt he had got at a bit of the truth. She replied hastily: 'I swear it, I swear it by . . .'

She was wondering what she could swear by, not daring to invoke anything sacred. He interrupted her. 'He was always following you into corners and devouring you with his eyes at every meal. Were you engaged to him? Out with it!'

This time she looked her master straight in the eyes: 'No, never, never! And I swear by Almighty God, if he came to-day and proposed, I wouldn't have him.'

She spoke with such an air of sincerity that the farmer hesitated; he went on a, though to himself: 'Then what is it? You had no accident or we should know about it. Since there were no consequences, a girl wouldn't refuse her master just because there had been someone else. But there must be something.'

She was silent now, speechless with anxiety. He asked once more: 'So you refuse?'

She sighed. 'I can't, Master.'

He turned on his heel. She thought she was rid of him and spent the rest of the day in peace but as worn out and exhausted as if she had been put to turn the threshing-machine instead of the old white horse.

She went to bed as soon as she could and fell asleep at once. About midnight she was woken by two hands feeling over the bed. She started in terror but soon recognized the farmer's voice saying: 'Don't be afraid, Rose; I've come to talk to you.'

At first she was merely surprised but, when he tried to get into

bed with her, she realized what he wanted and began to tremble all over; she knew she was alone in the dark, still heavy with sleep, quite naked in bed close to the man who wanted her. She was certainly not willing but her resistance was half-hearted, for she was struggling against natural instincts stronger in simple folk and inadequately controlled by a will that is always weak among these slow-witted spiritless people. She turned her face now towards the wall, now towards the room, to avoid the kisses which the farmer tried to press upon her mouth, and her body writhed under the blanket, exhausted by her struggles. He was getting rough, mad with passion. With a sudden jerk he pulled off the bed-clothes and he knew he could resist no longer. With the modesty of the ostrich she hid her face in her hands and surrendered.

The farmer stayed with her all night and came back the next night and then every night. They lived together. One morning he said 'I'm going to put up the barns. We'll be married next month'. She did not answer. What could she say? She put up no opposition. What could she do?

IV

She married him. It was as if she was at the bottom of a hole with precipitous sides from which there was no escape, with all sorts of misfortunes hanging over her like great rocks ready to fall on the slightest provocation. She felt all the time as if she had tricked her husband and as if he was bound to discover it sooner or later, while at the same time she thought of her child, the cause of all her troubles but also the source of the only happiness she knew on earth.

She used to go and see him twice a year and each time returned more depressed.

However, as time went on her fears were allayed and she recovered her composure; she regained her poise, though there was still always a vague anxiety at the back of her mind.

Years passed and the boy was now nearly six. She was almost happy again, when a sudden gloom descended on the farmer.

For the last two or three years he had seemed worried; something was bothering him, some depression that deepened with time. He would sit long at table after his dinner with his head in his hands, the victim of some vexation or annoyance. He took to speaking sharply, almost angrily.

One day a neighbour's small boy had come to get some eggs and, being very busy, she spoke roughly to him, when her husband suddenly appeared and said unkindly: 'If he was your own child, you wouldn't treat him like that.'

She paused, startled, unable to say anything, and then went in with all her fears reawakened.

At dinner the farmer did not speak to her or look at her, as if he hated her and despised her and had something definite against her.

Losing her head and not daring to remain alone with him after the meal, she escaped and ran to the church.

Night was falling and the narrow nave was all in darkness, but someone was shuffling about in the silence in the direction of the choir, for the sacristan was getting the lamp before the tabernacle ready for the night. This flicker of light in the shadows of the vaulted roof seemed to Rose like a last ray of hope and, fixing her eyes on it, she fell on her knees. There was the grating of the chain as the tiny night-lamp was pulled up. Presently she heard the clatter of sabots on the stone floor, followed by the sound of a rope being pulled, and the thin notes of the cracked bell rang out the evening Angelus through the growing darkness. As the man was leaving the church, she joined him. 'Is his Reverence at home?' she asked.

He answered: 'I expect so; he always has his dinner at the Angelus.'

With a trembling hand she pushed open the gate of the priest's house. He was just starting his meal and immediately asked her to take a seat.

'Yes, yes! I know; your husband has already spoken to me about the object of your visit.'

The poor woman's heart was failing her. The priest went on. 'What can you expect, my child?'

He went on swallowing his soup rapidly, the drops from the spoon falling on the greasy cassock that covered his portly stomach.

Rose's courage had evaporated, she could not beg or pray; she got up. The priest said: 'Don't lose heart!'

She went out and returned to the farm in a daze. The farmer was waiting for her, the labourers having gone home during her absence. She threw herself heavily at his feet and bursting into floods of tears she groaned: 'What have I done? What have you got against me?'

He started shouting and swearing: 'Good God! the trouble is I haven't got any children. When a man marries a wife, it isn't because he wants to be alone with her all his life. That's my grouse. If a cow doesn't have a calf she's no blooming good; and if a woman doesn't have children, she's no good either.'

She went on crying, saying over and over again: 'It's not my fault! It's not my fault!'

At this he softened and added: 'I don't say it is, but it's exasperating all the same.'

v

From that day forward she had only one idea, to have a child, another child; and she confessed her longing to everyone. A neighbour suggested a means; she must give her husband every night a glass of water with a pinch of ashes in it to drink. The farmer did his part but there was no result. They said to each other: 'Perhaps there are things we don't know about.'

On making enquiries they were told about a shepherd who lived thirty miles away, and Farmer Vallin went off one day in his gig to consult him.

The shepherd gave him a loaf, kneaded with herbs, on which he made certain marks; both of them were to eat a piece of this at night before and after their embraces. The whole loaf was eaten up but nothing happened.

An elementary schoolmaster revealed to them strange secret ways of making love, unknown in the country, which never failed, according to him. But there was no result.

The priest advised a pilgrimage to the Precious Blood at Fécamp. Rose went with the crowd to worship in the Abbey and mingling her prayer with the coarse desires in the minds of all these peasants, she besought Him to whom all this devotion was being paid to make her conceive a second time.

It was all in vain. Then she got the idea that she was being punished for her first slip and she was plunged in hopeless depression. Worry was wearing her out; her husband, too, was ageing; he was fashing himself, as they put it, eating out his heart in vain hopes.

Finally it came to open war between them. He swore at her and beat her. He kept on nagging at her every day and in bed at night, breathless with bitter hatred, hurling in her face insulting and even foul language.

At last one night, unable to think of anything more to hurt her, he told her to get up and wait for daylight outside the door in the rain. As she did not obey, he seized her by the neck and began to pound her face with his fist. She said nothing and did not move. Exasperated, he knelt on her stomach and clenching his teeth in mad fury, belaboured her unmercifully.

In a moment of desperate revolt she hurled him back violently against the wall, sat up in bed, and hissed in a voice he did not recognize: 'I've had a child, I've got a child, by Jacques - you remember him; he was to marry me, but he left.'

The man stayed where he was, dumbfounded, as bewildered as his wife; he stuttered: 'What do you say? What do you say?'

At that she began to sob and through her streaming tears she stammered: 'That was why I didn't want to marry you – that was why. I couldn't tell you or you'd have turned me out to starve with the baby. You've never had a child, you haven't; you can't get one, you can't.'

He repeated mechanically, with mounting surprise: 'You've got a child! You've got a child!'

She went on through her sobs: 'You took me by force – you remember that, don't you? I didn't want to marry you.'

The man got up and lit the candle and began walking up and down the room with his hands behind his back. She was still sobbing, collapsed on the bed. Suddenly he stopped in front of her, saying: 'Then it's my fault I haven't given you a child.'

She remained silent and he resumed his walk. Presently he stopped again and said: 'How old is your kid?'

She murmured: 'He's nearly six.'

He asked again: 'Why didn't you tell me?'

She groaned: 'How could I?'

He stood motionless and after a pause said: 'Come along! Get up!'

She made an effort and sat up. When she had got out of bed and was leaning against the wall, he suddenly burst out laughing, as he used to do in the good old days. As she was still dazed and bewildered, he added: 'Well! We'll go and fetch your child and bring him here as we've none of our own.'

She was so frightened that if she had had the strength she would certainly have run away. But the farmer, rubbing his hands, murmured: 'I had thought of adopting one and here's one ready made. I had asked the priest if he knew of an orphan.'

Then, still laughing, he kissed his dazed wife's tear-stained face on both cheeks and shouted as though she was deaf: 'Come along, Mother, let's see if there's any soup left; I could do with a good mugful!'

She slipped on her skirt and they went downstairs; and, while

she knelt down to light the fire under the saucepan, he went on striding up and down the kitchen, beaming and repeating: 'Well, I *am* pleased, I really am. We'll say no more about it, but I'm delighted, I really am delighted!'

MOTHER SAVAGE

I

I HADN'T been back to Vircligne for fifteen years. That autumn I went for some shooting to ~~stay~~ with my friend Scrvil, who had at last had his château rebuilt after its destruction by the Prussians.

The country had a very special attraction for me. There are delightful corners of the world which exercise a sensual charm on the eye. One loves them as one loves a woman. Those of us who are sensitive to the beauty of country always have a soft spot in our hearts for certain springs, certain woods, certain ponds, certain hills, which we know well and which have had on us the same effect as incidents we like to recall. Sometimes our thoughts revert to some forest glen, some bank or orchard carpeted with flowers, seen only once on a day when our spirits were high and which have remained ever since impressed on the memory. We remember them like pictures of women we have met in the street on a spring day in transparent summer frocks, which leave mental and physical desires, unsatisfied and unforgettable, the thrill of happiness once almost within our grasp.

At Vircligne the whole countryside attracted me, with copses here and there, intersected with streams running through the soil like veins filled with the life-blood of the earth. In them crayfish, trout, and eels could be caught – there's no sport like fishing! In places one could bathe, and snipe were often to be found in the long grass on the banks of these narrow rivulets.

I could have skipped like a he-goat as I watched my dogs hunting in front of me. A hundred yards to my right Scrvil was drawing a lucerne field. As I rounded the bushes marking the boundary of Sandres Wood, I caught sight of a cottage in ruins.

Suddenly I remembered it as I had last seen it in 1869, well-kept and vine-clad, with hens round the door. There is nothing so

depressing as a lifeless house, with only its skeleton standing, dilapidated and grim. I remembered, too, that the good woman had invited me in and given me a glass of wine one particularly tiring day, and that Serval had then told me the story of the family that lived there. The father, an old poacher, had been shot by the police. The son, whom I had seen at the time, was a tall lanky fellow with the reputation of being as great a Nimrod as his father. They were called the Savages – was it their real name or a nickname?

I hailed Serval, who came across with the raking stride of a wading bird. I asked: 'What became of the people who lived there?'

And he told me the following story.

II

When war was declared, young Savage, who was thirty-three at the time, enlisted, leaving his mother alone in the house. People were not unduly sorry for the old lady, because everyone knew she had money.

So she stayed on quite alone in this isolated house at some distance from the village on the edge of the wood. Moreover, she was not at all nervous, being of the same blood as her men-folk, a tough old woman, tall and spare, who rarely smiled and with whom no one took any liberties. Anyhow peasant women do not often smile – they leave that to their men-folk! Their life is drab and monotonous and their outlook grim and narrow. The countryman learns a certain amount of noisy cheerfulness at the public house but his mate remains serious and dour; her face muscles have never learnt to relax in laughter.

Mother Savage continued to live in her cottage as before in spite of the snow which buried it. She used to go in once a week to the village to get bread and a little meat and then returned home. As there was talk of wolves about, she used to sally forth with a gun on her back, her son's rusty old gun with the butt polished smooth by use. The old woman's tall figure was a strange sight as she

walked slightly bent over the snow with long strides, the barrel of the gun sticking out behind the black tight-fitting cap confining her white hair which no one had ever seen.

One day the Prussians arrived. They were billeted on the population according to each person's resources and the accommodation available. The old woman, who was known to be well off, got four.

They were four upstanding young fellows with fair skins, fair beards, and blue eyes; in spite of the rigours of the campaign they had remained fat and they behaved decently, though they were in a conquered country. Living alone with the old woman, they made things as easy for her as they could and tried to spare her work and expense. All four could be seen every morning washing in their shirt-sleeves round the well, sluicing their pink and white Nordic skin with water in the harsh light reflected from the snow, while Mother Savage bustled about getting the soup ready. Later they could be seen cleaning the kitchen, polishing the windows, cutting wood, peeling potatoes, washing the linen, in fact doing all the household chores, like four dutiful sons round their mother.

But the old lady was thinking all the time of her own son, the tall lanky boy with a hooked nose, brown eyes, and a heavy moustache forming a cushion of black hair on his upper lip. Every day she asked each of the soldiers quartered on her: 'Do you know where the Twenty-third French Infantry Regiment has gone to? My son is in it.'

They always replied: 'Us no savvy at all.'

Understanding her worries and anxieties, for they had mothers of their own in Germany, they did all they could to make things easy. Indeed she got very fond of them; for peasants do not feel patriotic hatreds — that is reserved for the upper classes. The expenses of war weigh most heavily on humble folk, because they are poor and any fresh charge is crushing; it is they on whom the worst casualties fall and who, because they are the most numerous, supply the cannon-fodder; in a word, they suffer most cruelly from all the agonizing miseries of war, because they are the weakest and

have least powers of resistance. So they do not understand enthusiasm for war, insistence on nice points of national honour, or all the alleged political complications, which in six months of war exhaust both sides, victors and vanquished alike.

Speaking of the Germans billeted on Mother Savage, people in the neighbourhood used to say: 'Those four fellows are in clover!'

Well, one morning, when the old woman was alone in the house, she saw in the distance across the flat country a man coming towards the cottage. She soon recognized him as the postman. He gave her a piece of paper folded and, taking from their case the spectacles she used for sewing, she read: 'Mme Savage. This is to bring you bad news. Your son, Victor, was killed yesterday by a cannon-ball, which practically cut him in two. I was quite near him, as we were next to each other in the company. He always asked me to let you know without delay if anything happened to him. I took his watch out of his pocket to bring back to you when the war is over. With kind regards, Césaire Rivot, Private 2nd Class, 22nd Infantry Regiment.'

The letter was dated three weeks earlier.

She shed no tears; she just stood there stock still under the shock, so dazed that she was not even conscious of pain. She was thinking: 'There, now Victor's been killed too!'

But presently her eyes filled with tears and grief swelled up in her heart. She began to realize what it meant and she suffered cruelly. She would never kiss him again, her great big son. Policemen had killed her husband and now Prussians had killed her son. He had been cut in two by a cannon-ball. She imagined the scene in all its horror, his head falling forward, his eyes staring, while he chewed the corner of his heavy moustache, as he did when he was angry. What had they done with his body afterwards? If only they had given her back her son's body, as they had her husband's with the bullet-hole in the centre of his forehead!

But she heard voices. It was the Prussians coming back from the village. She thrust the letter hurriedly into her pocket and received

them as if nothing had happened, showing no sign of emotion, for she had had time to dry her eyes.

They were all four laughing in high spirits, for they were bringing home a fine rabbit, no doubt stolen, and they conveyed to the old woman by signs that they would have a really good feed.

She immediately set about getting the midday meal ready; but when it came to killing the rabbit, her heart failed her, though it would not have been the first one! One of the soldiers killed it with a blow behind the ears. As soon as it was dead, she skinned the bleeding animal, but the sight of the blood all over her hands, the warm blood which she felt getting cold and clotting, made her tremble from head to foot; she could not banish from her mind the picture of her big boy cut in two, all bloody like this rabbit, whose heart was still beating.

She sat down with the Prussians but she could not swallow even one mouthful. They devoured the rabbit, not taking any notice of her. She watched them out of the corner of her eye, saying nothing but working out an idea in her mind; her face remained so impassive that they noticed nothing.

Suddenly she asked: 'We've been here a month together and I don't even know your names.'

With some difficulty they understood what she wanted and told her their names, but that didn't satisfy her; she made them write the names down on a piece of paper with the addresses of their families. Then, putting her spectacles back on her large nose, she scanned the strange foreign handwriting and, folding the sheet of paper, she placed it in her pocket with the letter announcing her son's death.

When the meal was over, she said to the men: 'I've got a job to do for you.'

And she started to carry up hay to the loft where they slept. They were surprised, wondering what she was about, but she explained that they would be warmer; so they helped her. They piled trusses of hay right up to the thatched roof, and in this way

they made a sort of large room with four walls of warm scented hay, where they would sleep very cosily

At supper one of them got worried when he saw that Mother Savage was still eating nothing. She declared that she had cramp in the stomach. Later she lit a good fire to warm herself, and the four Germans went up to their sleeping quarters by the ladder which they used every night.

As soon as the trap-door was shut the old woman took the ladder away; then she opened the outside door noiselessly and, sallying forth, she brought in trusses of straw with which she filled the kitchen. She went out in the snow so quietly that no sound was audible. From time to time she paused to listen to the four soldiers, who were now asleep and snoring loudly in different keys.

When she considered her preparations complete she threw one of the trusses on the fire, and when it had caught she scattered it over the others and went outside and watched.

In a few seconds a bright glare lit up the whole interior of the cottage and presently the kitchen was one great bonfire, a burning fiery furnace, whose blaze shone out through the window and cast a dazzling red glow on the snow.

Suddenly a loud cry rang out from the top storey, followed by a confused din with piercing shrieks of pain and terror. Presently the trap-door collapsed downwards and a whirling eddy of fire spouted up into the loft, forced its way through the thatched roof and soared into the sky like the flame of some gigantic torch, the whole cottage was in a blaze.

Nothing could be heard inside but the crackling of the fire as the walls disintegrated and the beams crashed down. The roof suddenly fell in and the blazing shell of the building sent up a great plume of sparks in the middle of a cloud of smoke. The snow-covered country, lit up by the conflagration, shone like a silver cloth tinged with red.

A bell began to ring in the distance.

Old Mother Savage remained standing in front of the wreck of

her house, with her gun, her son's gun, in her hand in case any of the men escaped. When she saw that it was all over, she threw the weapon into the fire and a shot rang out.

People now began to arrive on the scene, peasants and Prussians. They found the woman sitting on a tree-trunk, serene and satisfied.

A German officer, who spoke French like a Frenchman, asked her: 'Where are your soldiers?'

She stretched out a skinny arm towards the glowing fiery mass, which was now dying down, and replied in ringing tones: 'In there!'

They pressed round her and the Prussian asked. 'How did the fire start?'

She declared 'I started it!'

They did not believe her, thinking that the disaster had unhinged her mind. But, with everyone crowding round her and listening, she told the whole story from beginning to end, from the arrival of the letter to the last cry of the soldiers as they were burnt along with the house. She did not omit a single detail of her feelings or actions.

When she had finished she took two pieces of paper from her pocket and, in order to be able to read them by the light of the dying fire, she put on her spectacles. Then, pointing to one, she said: 'That one is about Victor's death.'

Pointing to the other, she added, with a nod in the direction of the red-hot wick of the cottage: 'Here are their names, so that letters may be sent to their people.'

She calmly handed the white sheet to the officer, who had his hand on her shoulder, and went on: 'I want you to write how it happened and tell their people it was me that did it, Victoire Simon, called Savage. Don't forget!'

The officer barked an order in German. She was seized and pushed against the still warm wall of her house. Twelve men fell in smartly facing her at twenty yards. She did not move; she understood and waited for the end. An order was shouted, followed

immediately by a volley. One isolated shot was fired after the others. The old woman did not fall, she slumped forward as if her legs had been cut from under her.

The Prussian officer went up to the body. She was almost cut in two and she was still holding her letter, now soaked in blood, in her clenched hand.

My friend Serval added. 'It was as a reprisal that the Germans destroyed the nearest château, which belonged to me.'

I was thinking of the mothers of those four nice boys who had been burnt in the cottage and of the savage heroism of that other mother who had been put up against this wall and shot. And I picked up a little stone still blackened by the fire.

FEAR

WE all went back on deck after dinner. Ahead there was not a ripple on the surface of the Mediterranean, which looked like a piece of watred silk under the full moon. The great steamer glided forward, sending a thick snake of black smoke up to the sky, which seemed sown with stars, while astern the water, gleaming white, churned up by the swift passage of the heavy ship, foamed and writhed under the beating of the screw, throwing up phosphorescent flashes, so that it looked like boiling moonlight.

There were six or eight of us, standing in silent admiration, gazing towards Africa in the distance, which was our destination.

The skipper, smoking a cigar in the centre of the group, suddenly resumed the conversation of the dinner-table. 'Yes, I was frightened that day! My ship had been lying for six hours with that rock in her vitals, pounded by the waves. Luckily we were picked up towards evening by an English collier which spotted us.'

At this point a tall sunburnt man with a grave expression spoke for the first time; he was one of those men who one feels have travelled far in unknown lands facing danger all the time and whose calm eyes seem to have retained in their depths something of the unfamiliar landscapes they have seen, one of those men who, one guesses, have never known fear.

'You say, skipper, you were afraid. I don't believe it! You are using the wrong word to describe your feelings. A man of grit is never afraid in the face of imminent danger. He is stimulated, excited, worried, but fear is something quite different.'

The skipper answered with a laugh: 'Well, I can assure you I *was* afraid!'

The man with the bronzed face went on, speaking deliberately: 'Let me explain myself. Fear – and the bravest can be afraid – is an excruciatingly terrifying feeling, as if the soul was disintegrating

and the heart and brain were paralysed by some devastating stroke, the mere memory of which makes one shiver with apprehension. But in the case of a brave man this does not occur in the face of attack or before certain death or any other of the ordinary forms of danger; it only occurs in certain abnormal circumstances, under certain mysterious influences in face of a peril one cannot understand. Real fear is a subconscious recollection of the fantastic terrors of primitive man. A person who believes in ghosts and imagines he sees one in the darkness inevitably feels all the appalling horror of fear.

'Some ten years ago I got an idea myself of what fear was in broad daylight. Last winter I felt it again on a December night.

'Yet I have been through many dangers, many experiences which I thought must end fatally. I have seen a lot of fighting. I was left for dead by bandits. I was condemned to be hanged as a rebel in America and thrown into the sea from the deck of a ship off the coast of China. Every time that I thought my last hour had come I faced the fact with resignation, without self-pity, even without regrets.

'But fear is something quite different.

'I had a presentiment of it in Africa. But it is really a product of the North; the sun drives it away like a fog. Notice this fact, Gentlemen. Among Orientals human life has no value; they face death with fatalism. Consequently their nights are untroubled by the dark terrors which haunt the consciousness of dwellers in cold climates. In the East panic is known but not fear.

'Well, here is the story of an experience I had here in Africa.

'I was crossing the vast sand-dunes south of Ouargla. It is one of the strangest places in the world. You all know the level straight stretches of sand on the endless ocean beaches. Well, imagine the ocean itself changed into sand in the middle of a hurricane; imagine a silent confusion of motionless waves of yellow dust. They tower up like mountains, these waves of unequal size, swelling up just like the waves of a stormy sea but vaster and streaked

like watered silk. Straight down on this wild ocean, soundless and motionless, the cruel Southern sun pours its remorseless rays. One must climb up and down the waves of golden ash and up again, climb unceasingly, unrelenting, without shade. The horses pant, sinking in up to the knees, and then slither down the reverse slope of these amazing sand-hills.

'We were two friends followed by eight palus and four camels with their drivers. We were moving in silence, overcome by heat and fatigue and parched with thirst like the baked desert. Suddenly one of our men uttered a sort of cry, everyone halted and we stayed without moving, surprised by an unexplained phenomenon, familiar to travellers in these little-known parts.

'Somewhere quite close – one could not say in what direction – a drum was beating, the mysterious desert drum, it was beating quite audibly, now louder, now fainter, stopping and then continuing its fantastic roll.

'The Arabs looked at each other in terror and one of them said in his own language "Death is upon us!" And lo and behold! at that moment my comrade, my friend who was almost a brother, fell head first from his horse smitten with sunstroke.

'For two hours, while I tried everything in vain to save his life, this elusive drum rang in my ears, beating its monotonous, intermittent, inexplicable tattoo, and I felt fear, genuine, hideous fear, penetrating my bones, in the presence of the body of him I loved, in the depression between four great sand-hills, while a mysterious echo brought to us, six hundred miles from the nearest French village, the rapid rolling of the drum.

'That day I knew what fear was and I knew it even better on another occasion.'

The skipper interrupted the speaker. 'Excuse me, Sir, but this drum, what is it?'

The traveller replied: 'I don't know; no one knows. Officers, often surprised by this strange sound, usually attribute it to the echo, magnified and multiplied and enormously swelled by the

valleys among the dunes, of a hail of grains of sand carried by the wind and striking against tufts of dry grass. It has been observed that the phenomenon always occurs in the neighbourhood of this sun-dried vegetation, whose leaves are as hard as parchment. So this drumming is a kind of sound mirage, that's all. But I didn't know this till later.

'Now for my second emotional experience.

'It was last winter in a forest in North-Eastern France. Darkness fell two hours early, so overcast was the sky. As guide I had a peasant, who was walking by my side along a very narrow track under a vaulted roof of pines, which were groaning in a tearing wind. Between the tree-tops I could see the racing clouds, which looked as if they were fleeing in panic terror. Sometimes under a tremendous gust the whole forest seemed to bend with a groan of pain. The cold pierced me in spite of my rapid pace and a heavy coat.

'We were to have supper and sleep at the house of a forest warden not far off. I often went there for shooting. My guide looked up at intervals, murmuring: "Rotten weather!" Then he spoke of the people to whose house we were going. The father had killed a poacher two years before and since then he had seemed depressed as if he had something on his mind. His two married sons lived with him.

'It was now very dark and I could see nothing in front or behind, while the branches of the trees rubbing against each other filled the darkness with ceaseless creaking. At last I saw a light and presently my guide was knocking at the door. Shrill women's cries were the reply.

'After a pause a man's voice, a choked voice, asked: "Who is it?" My guide gave his name and we were admitted. I shall never forget the scene inside.

'A white-haired old man, with wild eyes and a loaded gun in his hand, was waiting for us, standing in the centre of the kitchen, while two sturdy young men armed with axes were guarding the

door. In the dark corners I could make out two women on their knees with their faces to the wall.

'Explanations followed. The old man leant his gun against the wall and gave orders for my room to be got ready, then, as the women did not move, he said bluntly "You see, Sir, I killed a man two years ago to-night. Last year he came back to call me. I'm still expecting him to-night." And he added in a tone that made me smile "So we're all a bit nervous."

'I reassured him as best I could, not really sorry that I had come on this evening with a chance to study these people's superstitious terrors. I told stories and succeeded in quieting their nerves to some extent.

'Near the fire-place an old dog, nearly blind, with a heavy moustache, one of those dogs who are like so many people one knows, was asleep with his nose between his paws.

'Outside a howling storm was beating against the tiny house and through a narrow square window, a sort of peep-hole near the door, I suddenly saw a whole tangled mass of trees buffeted by the wind accompanied by brilliant flashes of lightning.

'In spite of my efforts I was fully conscious that everyone was still desperately nervous and each time I stopped talking all ears were strained to catch any sound in the distance. Tired of being a witness of their stupid fears, I was on the point of asking to go to bed when the old warden leapt from his chair and seized his gun again, stammering distractedly "There he is! There he is! I can hear him!" The two women fell on their knees in their corner, hiding their faces, and the two sons grasped their axes. I was about to try to calm them again when the sleeping dog suddenly woke up, and, raising his head and stretching out his neck, looking towards the fire with his dim eyes, uttered one of those dismal howls which frighten travellers in the country at night. All eyes were fixed on him, he was now standing still, erect on his legs, as if haunted by something he could see, and he began to howl at something invisible to us, mysterious and no doubt terrifying, for every hair of

his coat was bristling. The warden, turning pale, cried: "He can smell him! He can smell him! He was there when I killed him!" And the two women in consternation both began to howl in unison with the dog.

'In spite of myself a shiver ran down my spine. The sight of the dog, in this place, at this moment, with all these distracted people round, was terrifying.

'The dog kept up his howling for an hour without moving and a horrible fear began to master me – fear of what? I don't know. It was fear, that's all!

'We remained, not moving, deadly pale, expecting something dreadful, straining our ears, with beating hearts, trembling at every sound. Then the dog started circling round the room, sniffing the walls and whining all the time. The animal was sending us mad! Suddenly my peasant guide threw himself on the dog in a paroxysm of insane terror and, opening a door which gave on a small yard, threw the animal outside.

'He stopped howling immediately and we remained in silence still more frightening. Suddenly we all started. Some living creature was gliding close against the wall outside on the side of the forest; next he passed across the door, seeming to feel it with a hesitating hand; then for two minutes there was silence – we were now all quite insane. Finally he came back, still rubbing against the wall, and he scratched gently, as a child might with his finger. Next, without warning, a head appeared pressed against the pane of the peep-hole, a white head with blazing eyes like those of a wild animal; and a sound came from his mouth, an indistinct sound like a plaintive whine. A sudden crash echoed in the kitchen. The old warden had fired and immediately his two sons rushed and blocked the peep-hole, dragging the great table across the door and making it secure with the dresser.

'I swear to you that the crack of the gun-shot gave me such a shock, heart, soul, and body, that I felt faint, frightened literally to death.

'We stayed where we were till dawn, incapable of movement or speech, our nerves on edge with indescribable panic. They did not dare remove the barricade till they saw a thin ray of light through a crack in a shutter

'At the foot of the wall by the door lay the old dog, his brain shattered by a bullet. He had got out of the yard by scrabbling under the fence.'

The man with the sun-tanned face fell silent; after a pause he added: 'That night, however, I was in no danger, but I would rather go through again all the hours when I have faced the worst dangers than the one minute when the shot was fired at that bearded head at the peep-hole.'

THE MASK

THAT evening there was a fancy-dress ball at the Élysée-Montmaitre. It was the mid-Lent carnival and the crowd was pouring into the brightly lit passage leading to the dance-hall, like water into the sluice-gate of a lock. The plangent summons of the orchestra, bursting out like a hurricane of music, penetrated walls and roof and echoed over the whole district, awakening in the streets and even inside the houses that irresistible desire to jump about, get hot, and have a good time, which slumbers in every human heart.

The place had its regular patrons too, who came from the four corners of Paris, people of all classes, who like their pleasures vulgar and noisy, stimulated by alcohol and not quite respectable. There were clerks, pimps, and girls of every grade, from cotton frocks to silks and satins, girls with money, no longer quite young, and covered with diamonds, sixteen-year-olds without a penny, only in search of a good time, wanting to pick up a man and have money to throw about. Men in full evening dress, on the look-out for something young, not quite virginal perhaps but still attractive, were prowling round the heated throng, like hounds on the scent, while the maskers seemed only out to amuse themselves. Already the famous quadrilles were drawing round their antics a large crowd of spectators. A swaying pack of men and women moved in an irregular circle round the four dancers, like the sinuous coils of a snake, sometimes closing in, sometimes retiring, according to the figures of the dance. The two women, whose legs seemed attached to the body with indiarubber bands, performed amazing steps; they kicked so high that their legs appeared to be soaring into space; then suddenly they did a split, shooting out one leg in front and one behind with incredible speed and touching the ground in the middle, a revolting feat that always raised a laugh.

Their partners leapt in the air in a nimble entrechat, their bodies quivering from head to foot, waving their arms aloft like the stumps of featherless wings, and one could sense their laboured breathing under their masks.

One of the men in the most famous of the quadrilles, dancing as substitute for an absent star, the good-looking Dream-Boy, was doing his best to compete with his opposite number, the tireless Jumping-Jack, extemporizing original solo steps, which drew ironical applause from the audience.

He was thin as a rake, wearing the latest thing in evening dress and a handsome varnished mask with a fair curled moustache, surmounted by a waved wig.

He looked like a wax-work figure from the Musée Grévin, a strange, fantastic caricature of the smart young man in a tailor's fashion plate; he conscientiously put all he had into his dancing but he was clumsy and the result was merely comic. He was like a cripple, leaden-footed, a mongrel gambolling among greyhounds, and his joints seemed rusty compared with the others, though he did his best to copy their steps. Ironical cheers greeted his performance. Carried away by his excitement, he danced with such frantic energy that at last, losing control of himself, he charged head first into the ring of spectators, which opened to let him through and then closed again round his unconscious body sprawling face downwards on the floor.

He was picked up and carried away and a doctor summoned. A young man in full evening dress with large pearl studs in his shirt-front offered his services. 'I am a lecturer in the Faculty of Medicine,' he said modestly. They made way for him and he passed into a small room full of cardboard boxes like a commercial traveller's office, where the dancer, still unconscious, was lying on two chairs. When the doctor tried to take off the mask he found a complicated attachment of thin wires fastening it to the wig, so that the whole head was enclosed in a continuous sheath, which could only be undone if one knew the secret. The neck itself was encased in a false

skin of chamois-leather in continuation of the chin, attached to the shirt-band.

The whole of this had to be cut away with strong scissors and, when the doctor had made a long incision in this strange headpiece from the shoulder to the temple, he stripped off the mask and revealed the face of an old man, worn, pale, thin, and wrinkled. Those who had carried in the masked figure with its youthful curls were so taken aback that no one laughed or uttered a word.

They gazed in silence at the pathetic face, lying with closed eyes on the rush-bottomed chairs; tufts of white hair, some quite long, hung down over the forehead, others, short and bristly, were sprouting on the chin, and side by side with this sad face was the pretty little painted mask, so young-looking, with its fixed smile.

After a considerable time the man recovered consciousness but he still seemed so weak and ill that the doctor was afraid of some serious complication.

‘Where do you live?’ he asked.

The old dancer seemed to be racking his memory, presently it came to him and he gave the name of a street that no one knew; so they had to ask in what district of Paris it was. He only gave the information with the greatest difficulty in slow halting words which showed his dazed condition. The doctor went on, ‘I’ll take you home myself’

He was curious to find out who this strange mountebank was and see where this freak of an acrobat lived.

A cab presently took the two of them to the other side of the hill of Montmartre.

It was a tall, seedy-looking house with a staircase sweating with damp, one of those houses that are continually being added to, with as many windows as there are holes in a sieve; standing between two derelict plots of land, it consisted of squalid tenements inhabited by a swarm of ragged, down-at-heel human beings.

The doctor, clinging to the banister-rail, a piece of rickety, sticky

wood, supported the dazed old man, who was beginning to recover, up to the fourth floor.

The door at which they knocked opened and a woman appeared; she was old too but spotlessly clean with a very white night-cap on top of a skinny head. She had the strongly-marked coarse features so typical of the honest devoted wives of the working class. She cried: 'Good God! What's 'appened to him?'

The doctor explained in a few words. She cheered up and reassured him, telling him that this sort of thing was nothing new.

'We must get 'im to bed, Sir; 'e'll go to sleep and be 'imself again in the morning.'

The doctor replied: 'But he can hardly speak!'

'Oh! that's nothing; 'e's been drinking, that's all. 'E 'ad nothing for 'is dinner, so as to be in good shape; then 'e 'ad a couple of absinthes to wake 'imself up. The drink oils 'is legs but it fuddles 'is brain and affects 'is speech. At 'is age 'e oughtn't to dance as 'e does. No indeed, Sir; it breaks my 'eart, but 'e's always been soft.'

The doctor in surprise pressed the point: 'But why on earth does he go on dancing like this at his time of life?'

She shrugged her shoulders, her face flushing with rising anger: 'Ah! why indeed? It's so folks may think 'e's young behind 'is mask and the girls may take 'im for a young toff and whisper naughty things in 'is ear and 'e may cuddle them and stroke their dirty cheeks with their scent and powder and creams. I've 'ad a deuce of a life with 'im the forty years it's been going on, Sir. But we must get 'im into bed first or 'e'll be bad. Would you give me a 'and with 'im? When 'e's like this, it takes me so long all alone.'

The old man was put sitting down on his bed, still dazed with the alcohol, his long white hair falling over his face. The woman looked at him with an expression of mingled affection and anger; she went on: 'Ain't 'e got a lovely 'ead for 'is age? And 'e's got to go and disguise 'imself as a play-boy, so they may think 'im young. It's a shame, it is! A lovely 'ead 'e's got, 'ain't 'e, Sir? Wait, I'll show you before we put 'im to bed.'

She went to a table with the basin, the jug, the soap, and the brush and comb. She picked up the brush and came back to the bed and brushed the drunk man's matted hair; in a minute she made him look like an artist's model, with long ringlets curling round his neck. Then, taking a step back to look at him, she cried. "E's a beautiful sight for 'is age, ain't 'e?"

'Yes, he is,' agreed the doctor, who was beginning to see the funny side of the thing. She added 'If only you'd known 'im when 'e was twenty-five! But we must get 'im to bed or the drink will turn in 'is stomach. Look, Sir, will you give 'is sleeve a pull? . . 'Igher up . . that's it . . good . . now 'is trousers . . wait a bit, I'll get 'is shoes off first . . there we are! . . Now you hold 'im on 'is feet while I turn down the bed . . there . . now we'll lay 'im down. And if you think he'll make room for me presently, you're quite wrong. I 'ave to find a corner for myself somewhere - 'e don't worry about me. You naughty old man, you!"

As soon as he felt himself in bed the old rascal closed his eyes, opened them again, and then shut them firmly, his expression of blissful contentment showed his fixed determination to sleep. The doctor's interest in his patient increased and he asked: 'So he goes to fancy dress balls to play at being young, does he?"

'Yes, 'e never misses onc, Sir, and 'e comes 'ome in the small hours in a dreadful state. You see it's regrets what takes 'im there, wearing a cardboard mask on 'is face, regrets 'e's not the man 'e was to attract the girls.'

By this time he was asleep and beginning to snore. She looked at him pityingly and went on: 'And 'e *was* a success with the girls an' no mistake! You wouldn't credit it, Sir; they were after 'im more than all the toffs and all the tenors and the generals.'

'Indeed, and what did he do?"

'Oh! you'll be surprised, when I tell you, for you didn't know 'im in 'is palmy days. Where I first met 'im was at a dance - 'e's always been crazy on dancing; it was love at first sight. I was caught like a fish on a 'ook. 'E was a lovely sight, Sir; to look at 'im

brought tears to your eyes; 'e was dark as a raven with curly 'air and black eyes as big as windows. Yes, 'e was a treat. 'E took me 'ome with 'im that night and I've never left 'im, never for a day, in spite of everything – and 'e's led me the deuce of a life.'

The doctor enquired: 'Are you married?'

She replied simply: 'Oh! yes, Sir, otherwise 'e'd have left me like the rest of them. I've been 'is wife and 'is servant, everything 'e wanted . . . and 'e's made me cry plenty and I 'id my tears from 'im. 'E used to tell me all 'is affairs, yes, me, Sir – 'e didn't know 'ow it 'urt me to listen.'

'But what was his job?'

'Ah! yes, 'is job . . . I forgot to tell you. 'E was first assistant at Martel's, an assistant the like of who 'is boss 'ad never 'ad . . . an artist 'e was, at an average of ten francs an hour.'

'Martel? Who was Martel?'

'The 'airdresser, Sir, the famous 'airdresser at the Opéra, who did the 'air of all the actresses. All the stars 'ad their 'air done by Ambroise and 'e made a fortune out of 'is tips. Ah, Sir, all women are the same, yes, all of 'em. When a man attracts them, there's nothing they won't give 'im; it's so easy but it 'urts so damnably to be told about it. 'E told me everything . . . 'e couldn't keep it to 'imself, 'e just couldn't. That's what men like! And they enjoy talking about it more than doing it perhaps.

'Whenever I saw 'im coming 'ome in the evening a bit pale, pleased with 'imself, 'is eyes shining, I used to say to myself: "Another one! I'm sure 'e's picked up a new one." I wanted to ask 'im; it 'urt me cruel to ask and I wanted not to know too, to stop 'im telling me, when 'e began. We used to look at each other. I knew quite well 'e couldn't keep it to 'imself and 'e'd soon come to it. I could tell it by 'is look, by the way 'e laughed, which meant: "I've 'ad a stunnin' one to-day, Madeleine!" I pretended not to notice or smell a rat. I laid the table and brought in the soup and sat down opposite 'im.

'These times, Sir, it was as if someone was crushing my love for

'im out of my body with a great stone. It 'urts, that does, it 'urts damnably. But 'e didn't understand, 'e didn't know that. 'E 'ad to tell somebody and boast as 'ow they was all in love with 'im . . . and 'e'd only got me to tell, you see, only me. So I 'ad to listen, though it nearly killed me. 'E began drinking 'is soup and presently 'e'd say: "Another one to-day, Madeleine!" I thought to myself: "Oh God! now we're for it! What a 'usband! Why did I ever meet 'im?" Then 'e was off: "Yes, another one, a real peach!" . . . And it would be some little piece from the Vaudeville or a chorus girl from the Variétés, and sometimes a famous star from the theatre. 'E told me their names and all about their flats and everything, yes, absolutely everything, Sir, little things that broke my 'eart. It wasn't enough to tell the story once, 'e told it over again from start to finish, so pleased with 'imself that I pretended to smile, so 'e shouldn't lose 'is temper with me.

'P'raps it wasn't all true what 'e told me. 'E was so pleased with 'imself that 'e was quite capable of inventing things. But p'raps sometimes it was true. Those evenings 'e pretended to be tired and 'e wanted to go to bed after supper. We 'ad supper at eleven, for 'e never got in before that because of the 'airdressing for the evening shows.

'When 'e'd finished 'is story, 'e smoked cigarettes walking up and down the room and 'e was such an adorably good-looking boy with 'is moustache and curly 'air that I thought: "It must be true, what 'e says; I'm mad on 'im myself, so why shouldn't other girls be as crazy?" I often wanted to cry and scream and run away and throw myself out of the window, as I cleared away, while 'e went on smoking. He used to yawn, opening 'is mouth wide, to show 'ow tired 'e was; and 'e used to say two or three times before 'e got into bed: "God! I *shall* sleep to-night!"

'I bear 'im no grudge, 'e didn't know 'ow 'e was 'urting me. No, 'e couldn't know; 'e liked showing off about women like a peacock showing 'is tail. 'E came to believe that every woman was looking at 'im and wanting 'im.

'It was 'ard when 'e got old. When I saw 'is first white 'air, Sir, my 'cart stood still; then I felt a joy, a wicked joy, but what joy! I said to myself: "That's the end of it, that's the end!" I felt as if I was being let out of prison. Now I should 'ave all to myself what the other women didn't want any more.

'It was one morning in bed. 'E was still asleep and I leant over to wake 'im up with a kiss, when I noticed among the curls on 'is temple a tiny thread of silver. You could 'ave knocked me down with a feather! I wouldn't have believed it possible. First I thought of pulling it out, so 'e shouldn't see it, then I looked closer and saw another 'igher up. White 'airs! So 'e was going white! My 'cart thumped and I came out all of a sweat, but I was really as pleased as Punch. It was an ugly thought but I was 'appy that morning, as I did the house, leaving 'im asleep. When 'e opened 'is eyes of 'imself, I said to 'im: "D'you know what I found while you was asleep? Well, I found you'd got some white 'airs!"

'E was so upset 'e sat up as if I'd tickled 'im and 'e said crossly: "That isn't true!"

"Yes, on the right temple. There are four of them"

'E jumped out of bed and ran to the glass. 'E couldn't find them, so I showed 'im the one lowest down, a little curly one, and I said to 'im: "It's no wonder with the life you lead. In two years you'll be finished."

'Well, Sir, I was right; two years later you wouldn't have known 'im; it changes a man so quick. 'E was still good-looking but the freshness was going and the women didn't run after 'im any more. I 'ad a rotten time about then - 'e treated me something awful. Nothing was right, absolutely nothing. 'E left 'is job and went into the 'at business and lost money in it. Then 'e tried acting, but 'e failed there; after that 'e took to going to public dance-halls; 'e did 'ave the sense to 'ang on to a bit of money; that keeps us going, it's just enough, though it ain't much. To think 'e was once really well off!

'Now you see the way 'e carried on. A bug gets into 'im; 'e must

be young, 'e must dance with women who stunk of scent and face-cream. But all the same 'e's rather a dear, the old man!

She gazed pityingly at her old husband, on the verge of tears. Tip-toeing up to the bed she kissed his hair. The doctor had got up and was preparing to leave, not knowing what to say in the presence of this strange couple.

As he was going, she asked: 'Look, Sir! Would you mind giving me your address? If 'e took real bad, I'd like to call you in.'

MOTHER DOT-AND-GO-ONE

How strange those old childhood memories are, which haunt you so that you can never forget them! The one I'm going to tell you is so old that I can't understand how it has remained so vivid and lasting in my mind. I've seen so many things, grim, exciting or terrible, that it is amazing that I can't spend a day, not a single day, without the face of Mother Dot-and-go-one rising up before my eyes as I knew her long years ago, when I was ten.

She was an old seamstress who used to come once a week on Tuesdays to my parents' house to do the mending. We lived in one of those country houses called 'châteaux', which are simply old houses with a pointed roof, on which four or five near-by farms depend.

The village, a large one with a market, was in sight a few hundred yards away, clustering round the church, a red brick building darkened with age.

Every Tuesday Mother Dot-and-go-one arrived between half past six and seven in the morning and went straight up to the linen-room to her work.

She was a tall thin woman with hair not only on her chin but all over her face; it grew in odd, unexpected, curly tufts that looked as if some madman had scattered them all over the broad face of a policeman in skirts. She had hair on her nose, under her nose, all round her nose, on her chin and on her cheeks. Her eyebrows were astonishingly thick and long, grey, bushy, and bristling, looking just like a pair of moustaches that had got into the wrong place by mistake.

She limped, not the way lame people usually limp, but like a ship rolling at anchor. When her good leg took the weight of her bony twisted body, it was as if she was taking off to surmount the crest of a wave, and then she suddenly plunged down into the trough far below. Her walk reminded you of a ship rolling in a storm; and her

head, always crowned with an enormous white cap with ribbons fluttering down her back, seemed to traverse the horizon from North to South and from South to North at every step.

I worshipped Mother Dot-and-go-one. Immediately I was up, I used to make my way to the linen-room, where I found her already at work sewing, with her feet on a foot-warmer. As soon as I arrived she made me take the foot-warmer and sit on it, so as not to catch cold in this huge cold room under the slates.

'The cold fair sucks the blood out of you,' she would say.

She used to tell me stories as she dained the linen with her long twisted fingers which moved so quickly. Age had affected her sight, and her eyes behind her strong glasses seemed to me huge, strangely deep, twice the usual size.

As far as I can remember her stories, which made a tremendous impression on my childish imagination, they revealed the natural goodness of the peasants in their broad simple outlook. She used to tell me all about the happenings in the village, the story of the cow which escaped from its shed and was found one morning at Prosper Malet's windmill watching the sails go round, or how an egg had been found in the church tower without anyone being able to understand how it had got there, or the story of Jean-Jean Pilas' dog, which travelled thirty miles to retrieve its master's trousers, which had been stolen by a tramp while hanging up to dry in front of the door after being worn in the rain. She told these simple tales in such a way that they assumed in my mind the proportions of unforgettable dramas and impressively mysterious poems. And the artificial tales invented by poets, which my mother read to me in the evenings, never had the flavour, the splendour, the power of the peasant woman's stories.

Well, one Tuesday when I had spent the whole morning listening to Mother Dot-and-go-one, I wanted to go up again later in the day after I had been out with the man-servant to pick nuts in Hallets Wood behind Blackfield Farm. I remember every detail as if it was yesterday.

As I opened the door of the linen-room I saw the old sewing-woman lying on the floor by the side of her chair, face downwards, with her arms extended, still holding her needle in one hand and a shirt of mine in the other. One of her legs, in a blue stocking, the good leg no doubt, was stretched under the chair, and her spectacles had fallen off and were shining at the foot of the wall.

I ran away screaming. People hastened up and in a few minutes I was told that Mother Dot-and-go-one was dead.

I can't describe the deep agonizing grief in my child's heart. I crept downstairs to the drawing-room and buried myself in a corner in a huge armchair, where I knelt in tears. I must have remained there some time, for it got dark.

Suddenly people came in with a lamp but they did not see me and I heard my father and mother talking to the doctor, whose voice I recognized.

He had been sent for at once and he was explaining the causes of the accident, which I didn't follow. Then he sat down and accepted a drink and a biscuit.

He went on talking and I still remember, and I shall remember to my dying day, what he said. I think I can reproduce his story in his very words.

This is what he said: 'That poor woman was my first patient here. She broke her leg the day I arrived; I hadn't even had time to wash my hands after getting out of the bus, when I was sent for in a hurry, for she was in a bad way, a very bad way.

'She was seventeen and a pretty girl, indeed a lovely girl. You wouldn't think so now! As for her story, I've never told it; only two people knew it, myself and one other who has left the neighbourhood. Now that she is dead I can speak.

'At that time a young assistant teacher, a good-looking boy with the physique of a sergeant-major, had just come to live in the village. All the girls were after him but he paid no heed – anyway he was terrified of his headmaster, old Grabu, who got out of bed on the wrong side most days.

Even then old Grabu used to employ the lovely Hortense, who has just died in your house and who got the nickname of Dot-and-go-one after her accident, as sewing-maid. The assistant teacher fell for the beautiful girl, who was no doubt flattered by the attentions of the unimpressible Adonis, anyhow she fell in love with him and agreed to meet him for the first time in the loft at the school after dark one day when she had been there sewing

'So she pretended to go home, but instead of going downstairs when she left the Grabus' flat, she went up and hid in the hay to wait for her lover. He soon joined her and was beginning to make love to her when the door of the loft opened again and the schoolmaster appeared, asking "What are you doing up there, Sigisbert?"

'Realizing that he would be caught, the young teacher lost his head and replied stupidly "I came up to lie down in the hay and have a rest, Monsieur Grabu."

'The loft was very large and pitch dark, and Sigisbert tried to push the frightened girl towards the far end, saying "Go along there and hide! I shall lose my job! Do go away and hide!"

'The schoolmaster, hearing whispering, went on "So you're not alone there!"

' "Yes, I am, Monsieur Grabu."

' "You're not! You're talking to somebody!"

' "I swear I am, Monsieur Grabu!"

' "Well, we'll soon find out!" continued the old man; and double-locking the door he went down to get a candle.

'Then the young man, who was a coward like so many men, lost his head and his temper too, apparently, and cried "Do hide! He mustn't find you! You'll make me lose my job and wreck my career; for goodness' sake hide!"

'They heard the key turn in the lock again. Hortense ran to the gable window, threw it open, and in a low determined voice said: "You'll come and pick me up when he has gone."

'And with that she jumped. Old Grabu found no one and went down again much surprised.

'A quarter of an hour later Monsieur Sigisbert came to my surgery and told me what had happened. The girl was lying at the foot of the wall, unable to get up, having fallen from the third storey. I went with him to find her. It was pelting with rain and I carried the unfortunate girl to my house; her right leg was fractured in three places and the bone was sticking out through the flesh. She did not complain, saying with complete resignation: "I'm punished! Well punished!"

'I got help and sent for the girl's parents, to whom I pitched a tale about a runaway carriage knocking her over and breaking her leg in front of my door.

'They believed me and the police looked for the author of the accident for three months without success.

'That's her story. I consider this woman a heroine, comparable with the great women of history. She never had another love affair and died a virgin, a martyr, a sublime soul, a great idealist! If my admiration for her had not been unbounded, I should never have told you this story, which I never revealed in her lifetime — you will understand why.'

The Doctor paused. Mother was in tears and Father said something I didn't catch. Presently they left the room. I remained kneeling in the armchair, sobbing, while I heard strange heavy steps and bumps on the stairs. They were carrying away Mother Dot-and-go-one's body

THE CHRISTENING

‘COME along, Doctor! Have a drop of brandy!’

‘I don’t mind if I do!’

And the retired naval surgeon, holding out his liqueur glass, watched the golden fluid rise to its lip. Then he lifted it to the level of his eye, poised it so that the lamp-light shone through it, sniffed it, took a few drops which he rolled round for some time on his tongue and the sensitive surface of his palate, and finally said: ‘What a delightful poison it is! But it is really an insidious murderer which destroys whole races by its fascination.

‘You fellows don’t realize its power. I know you’ve read that excellent novel, *The Dram-shop*, but you haven’t seen as I have a savage tribe, a little nigger kingdom, wiped out by alcohol, imported in small round kegs, unloaded by red-bearded English sailors.

‘But wait a minute! I once saw with my own eyes a strangely impressive tragedy caused by alcohol quite close here in Brittany in a little village near Pont-l’Abbé.

‘At that time I was on a year’s leave, living in a country house my father had left me. You know this flat coast, where the wind whistles through the reeds day and night; here and there you see, erect or recumbent, those huge monoliths which were once gods and which retain something disturbing in their position, their outline, and their shape. I always imagine them coming to life; I expect these colossal pieces of granite to set off over the country with slow dignified gait or fly away on immense stone wings towards the Druids’ Paradise.

‘The restless sea encloses and dominates the horizon, bristling with black reefs, which are always encircled with a ring of foam, like dogs lying in wait for the fishermen.

‘The men go out on this terrible sea, which capsizes their boats

with a heave of its grey-green back and swallows them like pills. They go forth in their cockle-shells by day and night, fearless but anxious, and drunk. "When the bottle is full," they say, "you see the reefs; when it's empty, you don't see them any more."

'Go into any cottage and you never find the father. If you ask the woman what has happened to her husband, she will point to the dark sea, growling and spitting out its foam all along the shore; one night he drank too much and never came home. And the eldest son too. She still has four boys, four fine upstanding young fellows; it will soon be their turn.

'Well, I was living in a country house near Pont-l'Abbé. I was there alone with my servant, an old sailor, and a Breton family who took care of the place when I was away, there were three of them, two sisters and the husband of one of them, who looked after the garden.

'That year about Christmas time my garden's wife gave birth to a son.

'The husband came and asked me to stand god-father. I could hardly refuse and he borrowed ten francs from me for the expenses of the christening, so he said.

'The ceremony was fixed for January 2nd. For a week the countryside had been covered with a pale frozen carpet of snow which seemed to stretch endlessly over the low-lying flats. The sea showed up black far away beyond the white plain. You could see it heaving restlessly, gathering up its rollers like a wild beast ready to pounce upon its neighbour, which lay so flat, so cheerless, so cold, like a corpse.

'At nine o'clock in the morning the father, Kérandec, arrived at my door with his sister-in-law, a big woman called Kermagan, and the nurse carrying the infant rolled up in a blanket.

'We set off for the church. The cold was enough to split the dolmens, that piercing cold which cracks the skin and sears the face painfully. I was thinking of the poor little creature who was being carried in front of us and saying to myself that the Breton race must

indeed be made of iron for their children to be able to endure such a walk as soon as they are born.

'We reached the church but the door was still locked. The priest was late.

'Then the nurse, sitting down on a stone near the door, began to undress the infant. I thought first of all that he had wetted himself, but I saw she was leaving him naked, poor little devil, stark naked, in that icy air. I went up to her, shocked at such folly. "You're mad - you'll be the death of him!"

'The woman replied calmly 'Oh no, Sir! He must wait for God naked."

'The father and the aunt watched the proceeding without emotion. It was the custom. If it was not followed some misfortune would happen to the child.

'I lost my temper and swore at the man, I threatened to go away and I tried to cover the tiny body forcibly, but it was no good. The nurse ran away from me in the snow and the infant's body began to turn blue.

'I was on the point of leaving these barbarous folk when I saw the priest coming across country with the sacristan and a local boy.

'I ran to him and expressed my indignation in no uncertain terms. He showed no surprise and did not increase his pace or make any attempt to hurry. He replied "What can you do, Sir? It's the custom. They always do it and we can't prevent it."

"But at least hurry!" I shouted.

'He answered: "I can't walk any faster."

'He went into the vestry, while we stayed outside the church door, where I'm sure I suffered more than the poor infant who was howling in the biting cold.

'At last the door was opened but the child had to remain naked all through the service.

'I thought it would never end. The priest droned on, punctuating the Latin words so as to make nonsense. He moved slowly, as slowly as a sacred tortoise, and his white surplice froze my heart

as if it were a snow vestment he had put on in order to inflict pain on this poor little mite, who was being tortured by the cold in the name of a cruel barbarous God

'At last the service was over and I saw the nurse wrap the frozen baby, who was uttering shrill heart-rending moans, in the blanket again

'The priest said to me "Will you come and sign the register?"

'I turned to my gardener 'Now hurry up home and get the child warm without delay' And I gave him some directions in the hope of preventing pneumonia, if it was not already too late The man promised to carry out my instructions and went away with his sister-in-law and the nurse I followed the priest into the vestry

'When I had signed he demanded a fee of five francs

'Having already given the father ten francs, I refused to pay again The priest threatened to tear up the certificate and declare the ceremony null and void I threatened him in my turn with the Public Prosecutor After a long acrimonious dispute I paid

'As soon as I got home I was anxious to know if anything serious had developed and hurried to Kerandec's house, but neither the father, the sister-in-law nor the nurse had returned

'The mother, who had been left alone, was shivering with cold in bed and was starving, having had nothing to eat since the day before

' "Where the devil have they got to?" I asked.

'She replied, showing neither surprise nor indignation "They'll have been on the booze, I expect, to celebrate the baptism"

'It was the custom Then I thought of my ten francs which were to have paid the church fees and which no doubt would be paying for their drinks

'I sent up some hot soup to the mother and had a good fire lit in her room I was worried and very angry, promising myself to give the callous brutes a good dressing down and wondering anxiously what was happening to the wretched infant

'At six in the evening they were still not back I told my servant

to wait up for them and went to bed. I dropped off at once, for I have a sailor's power of sleep.

'My servant called me at dawn with my shaving-water. As soon as I was awake, I asked: "What about Kérandec?"

'The man hesitated before stammering: "Oh! he came in after midnight, so drunk he couldn't walk straight, and that hulking Kermagan and the nurse were in the same state. I think they had all been asleep in a ditch so that the infant died without their even noticing it."

'I leapt out of bed shouting: "The child is dead!"

' "Yes, Sir! They took it up to Mother Kérandec. When she saw it, she began to cry; so they made her drink to cheer her up."

' "What? They made her drink!"

' "Yes, Sir! I only found it out just now, this morning. As Kérandec had no more brandy and no more money, he took the paraffin for the lamp you gave him and they drank that, all four of them, till the bottle was empty. The Kérandec woman is pretty bad as a result."

'I hurried into my clothes and, seizing a walking-stick with the intention of giving all these brutes in human shape a sound thrashing, I hastened to my gardener's house.

The mother was at her last gasp, drunk on the paraffin, lying by her baby's frozen body. Kérandec, the nurse, and the sister-in-law were snoring on the floor. I had to attend to the wife, who died about mid-day.'

The old doctor stopped. He reached for the brandy bottle and poured himself out another tot; and after again holding it up so that the lamp-light shone through the golden liquor, transforming it into melted topaz in the glass, he gulped down the fatal fiery spirit.

GAFFER MILO

A SUMMER sun had been blazing down on the baked fields for a month; under its warmth everything was bursting into vigorous life. As far as the eye could see the earth was one sheet of green and there was not a cloud in the blue sky. The Normandy farmsteads, enclosed in a ring of slender beeches, looked like small copses from a distance. When you got near and opened the worm-eaten gate, a great stretch of orchard met the eye, for the old apple-trees, gnarled like the peasants themselves, were in full bloom. Above the aged trunks, crooked and twisted, which were planted round the yard, rose dazzling domes of white and pink, while the intoxicating scent of the blossom mingled with the acrid smell from the open doors of the cow-sheds and the fumes of the fermenting manure-heap, on which hens were pecking about.

It was noon and the household were at dinner in front of the door under a pear-tree, father, mother, and four children, with two servant-girls and three farm hands. There was not much conversation; first came the soup, then the cover was removed from the dish of stew with potatoes and bacon. From time to time one of the girls would get up and go to the cellar to refill the cider jug.

The farmer, a powerfully built man of forty, was gazing at a vine, still bare, which ran coiling like a snake the whole length of the house below the shutters.

At last he spoke: 'Father's vine be shooting early this year; mayhap 'twill fruit.'

His wife turned round to look but said nothing.

The vine marked the exact spot where his father had been shot.

*

It was during the 1870 war. The whole countryside was in enemy hands, while General Faidherbe with the army of the North was

facing them. The Prussian Headquarters was established in this farm, where the old peasant proprietor, Gaffer Pierre Milo, had received them and accommodated them as well as he could.

The German advance guard had been stationed in the village for a month reconnoitring. The French troops were thirty miles away, showing no signs of activity; and yet every night casualties were occurring among the Lancers. Scouts, sent out to patrol the district in twos and threes, never came back. They were always picked up dead in the morning, in a field, at the edge of a farm-yard, or in a ditch. Even their horses were found along the roads with their throats slashed with sabre wounds.

These deaths seemed the work of the same men, but they could not be identified.

The Prussians tried a policy of terrorism; peasants had only to be denounced to be shot without investigation, women were imprisoned, and they tried to get information from children by frightening them, but nothing was discovered.

Then one morning Gaffer Milo was found unconscious in a cowshed with a sword wound across his face.

Two Lancers were found a mile and a half from the farm disembowelled. One of them still had his blood-stained sabre in his hand; he had put up a fight for his life.

A court-martial was immediately assembled in the open air in front of the farm and the old man was brought before it.

He was sixty-eight, a small thin man, slightly bent, with huge hands like the claws of a crab; his skull showed through his scanty faded hair, which was sparse like the down on a duckling. Under folds of brown skin at the neck swollen veins were visible running under the jaw and coming out again at the temples. He was considered close in the neighbourhood and would drive a hard bargain.

He was made to stand between four soldiers in front of the kitchen table which had been brought out. Five officers and the Colonel were seated facing him. The Colonel addressed him in French: 'Gaffer Milo, since we have been here we have had no

cause of complaint against you. Your behaviour has always been correct; you have even gone out of your way to do things for us. But to-day you face a serious accusation and we must get at the facts. How did you get that wound on your face?’

The peasant did not answer. The Colonel went on: ‘Your silence is an admission of guilt, Gaffer Milo. But I insist on an answer, you understand. Do you know who killed the two Lancers who were found this morning near the Calvary?’

The old man answered without hesitation: ‘It were me myself.’

The Colonel, taken aback, said nothing for a moment, looking hard at the prisoner. Old Milo showed no trace of emotion on his stolid peasant’s face and kept his eyes lowered as if he were talking to his priest. There was only one indication that he was worried; he kept swallowing with a visible effort as if his throat was congested. The old fellow’s family, his son John, his daughter-in-law, and her two small children, were standing ten yards away behind him, terrified.

The Colonel went on: ‘Do you also know who killed our other scouts whose bodies have been found for the last month all over the countryside?’

The old man answered with the same animal impassivity: ‘It were me.’

‘You killed them all?’

‘Aye, ’twere me myself as killed ’em all.’

‘Did you do it by yourself?’

‘Aye, by myself alone.’

‘How did you manage to do it? Tell me.’

This time Milo did seem upset, obviously worried by the prospect of having to make a long statement. He stammered: ‘Ow’d I know? I did it quite natural like.’

The Colonel went on: ‘I warn you, you’ve got to tell me the whole story. So you’d better make up your mind to speak quickly. How did you begin?’

The peasant glanced anxiously at his family, who were listening

intently behind him. After a moment's hesitation he suddenly made up his mind: 'I were comin' 'ome one evenin' - 'twould 'ave been about ten o'clock - the day after you'd comed 'ere. You an' yer men 'ad took off me more than two hundred and fifty francs worth of 'ay an' a cow an' a couple o' sheep. I says to myself: "For every time they takes one hundred francs off me I'll get one back on them." An' then there was other things I 'adn't forgot too, I tell you. Well, I seed one of yer men smokin' 'is pipe by my ditch be'ind the barn; so I goed an' un'itched my scythe an' I come back on tip-toe be'ind 'im, so 'e didn't 'ear nothin'. An' I cut off 'is 'ead with one sweep, just one, like I ear o' corn - 'e didn't even say "Ow!" You go an' look at the bottom o' the pond an' you'll find 'im there in a coal-sack with a big stone from the gate. Then I 'ad an idea: I took off all 'is gear from 'is boots to 'is cap an' I 'id 'em in the cement-kiln in Martin's copse behind the yard.'

The old man stopped and the officers looked at one another in amazement. Presently the questioning was resumed and this is what they learnt.

*

The first murder successfully accomplished, killing Prussians became an obsession with Milo. He hated them with the cunning, relentless hatred of a peasant, whose cupidity did not exclude patriotic feelings. He had an idea, as he said. He waited for a day or two. He had complete freedom of movement to come and go as he pleased and he continued to behave with exemplary humility to the occupying power, always obedient and obliging. Every evening he saw the patrols go out, and one night he went out too, having caught the name of the village to which the mounted men were going - for he had picked up enough German from living with the soldiers to understand.

He went out of the yard and slipped into the copse, reached the cement-kiln and went to the end of the long passage, where he found the dead man's uniform on the ground, and put it on.

Then he prowled about in the fields, keeping close to the banks for cover, listening anxiously to every sound like a poacher.

When he thought the moment had come, he approached the road and hid in the brushwood, still waiting. At last about midnight he heard the sound of a horse galloping on the hard surface of the road. Putting his ear to the ground to make sure that it was only one man coming, he made his preparations.

The Lancer was trotting along carrying despatches, keeping a sharp look-out and listening intently. When he was within ten yards, old Milo diaggd himself out on to the road, crying in German. 'Help! Help!' The rider stopped and, seeing a German dismounted, thought he was wounded and got off his horse. He came up unsuspecting and, as he bent over the unknown man, he got the long blade of the sabre full in the stomach. He fell without a struggle and died with one convulsive spasm.

Then the Norman got up with an old peasant's quiet smile and to relieve his feelings cut the throat of the corpse and dragging it to the ditch threw it in. The horse was waiting placidly for its master. Gaffer Milo mounted and galloped off across country.

An hour later he sighted two more Lancers side by side, returning to their quarters. He rode straight at them, shouting again in German. 'Help! Help!' The Prussians let him approach, suspecting nothing when they recognized the uniform. The old man dashed between them like a buller, bringing them both down, one with his sabre and one with his revolver.

After this he cut the throats of the horses, just because they were German horses. Then he went quietly back to the cement-kiln and hid the horse at the end of the dark passage. He got out of the uniform, put on his ragged ordinary clothes and, going back to bed, slept soundly till morning.

For four days he did not go out again, waiting for the end of the investigation that was opened; but on the fifth day he set out again and killed two more soldiers by the same stratagem.

After that he was out every night. He wandered round and

prowled about in every direction, cutting down Prussians now here, now there; he galloped over the deserted countryside in the moonlight hunting men, like a Lancer who had lost his way. His job finished, leaving behind him the bodies lying on the roadside, the old rider returned to conceal his horse and uniform at the back of the cement-kiln.

About noon he used to go quietly to take oats and water to his horse, which he kept at the end of the underground passage; he gave it plenty to eat, because he was working it very hard.

But the day before one of the two Germans he attacked had defended himself and slashed the old peasant's face with his sabre.

He had, however, killed them both. Afterwards he had gone home again, hidden the horse, and dressed again in his working clothes; but, as he was going in, he had felt faint and dragged himself to the cow-shed, unable to get as far as the house.

They had found him there on the straw, covered with blood.

*

When he had finished his story, he suddenly raised his head and looked proudly at the Prussian officers.

The Colonel, tugging at his moustache, asked: 'Is that all you have to say?'

'Aye, that's all, I've counted 'em up right, I've done in sixteen o' them, not one more nor one less.'

'You realize you've got to die?'

'I never asked for mercy, did I?'

'Were you ever in the army?'

'Aye, I did my bit once. An' then it were you killed my Dad, who were a soldier of the first Emperor; an' you killed my boy François, last month at Évreux. I owed you for that and now I've paid, so we're quits.'

The officers looked at each other and the old man went on: 'Eight for my Dad an' eight for my boy - so we're square. I've got no quarrel with you, I ain't - I don't know you, I only knows

where you come from. This is my house and you gives orders 'ere as if it was yours. So I got my own back on them others. I'm sorry for nothing.' And straightening up his rheumatic body, the old man crossed his arms, the picture of a humble hero.

The Prussians talked together in low tones for some time. A Captain, who had also lost his son the month before, spoke up in defence of the high-spirited peasant. Finally, the Colonel rose and going up to old Milo said in a whisper: 'Listen, Gaffer, perhaps we can save your life yet, if . . .'

But the old fellow was not listening; he was looking straight at the victorious officer, while the breeze blew about the thin wisps of hair on his scalp. Then he made a frightful grimace, which distorted his thin face already seamed with the scar; and, taking a deep breath, he spat full in the Prussian's face with all his force.

The Colonel raised his hand in anger and Milo spat in his face a second time.

The officers had leapt to their feet and were shouting orders all together.

In less than a minute the old chap, still showing no sign of emotion, was put up against the wall and shot, still smiling at his eldest son, John, and his daughter-in-law and her children, who were helpless witnesses of the scene.

THE GAMEKEEPER

It was after dinner and we were telling stories about adventures and accidents out shooting. Monsieur Boniface was there, an old friend of all of us, a mighty hunter and a hard drinker; he was powerfully built and a cheery soul, humorous, full of common sense, and a bit of a philosopher. But he was no rebel, his philosophy showing itself in irony and wit, barbed but not poisoned. Suddenly he remarked: 'I know a shooting story, or rather a dramatic incident connected with sport, of a rather unusual character. It isn't a bit like most anecdotes of this kind; moreover, I've never told it before because I didn't think it would amuse anyone. It hasn't got a happy ending, I mean; it hasn't got the sort of interest that thrills or charms or tickles the emotions pleasantly. Anyhow, here it is!

'I was about thirty-five at the time and mad keen on shooting. I owned a very isolated property in the Jumièges neighbourhood, surrounded by woods and excellent for hares and rabbits. I used to go there for four or five days a year by myself, the accommodation being insufficient to allow me to take a friend.

'I had put in as gamekeeper an old retired policeman, an excellent fellow if hot-tempered, who carried out my instructions to the letter and was a terror to poachers, being quite fearless. He lived by himself some distance from the village in a cottage, or rather a shack, consisting of two rooms on the ground floor, a kitchen and a store-room, and two rooms upstairs. One of these, a mere box, just big enough to hold a bed, a wardrobe, and one chair, was kept for my use.

'Father Cavalier had the other. When I said that he was alone in the house, I wasn't strictly accurate. He had got his nephew with him, a scamp of fourteen, who used to go to the village two miles away to do the shopping and helped the old man in his everyday work. This little scapegrace, who was tall and skinny and held him-

self badly, had tow-coloured hair so thin that it looked like the down of a plucked hen and so sparse that he seemed bald. He also had very large feet and the huge hands of a colossus. He had a slight squint and never looked you straight in the face. Among human beings he affected me in the same way that creatures which stink affect other animals. The young rascal was like a skunk or a fox.

'He slept in a sort of alcove at the top of the little staircase leading to the two first floor rooms. But during my visits to 'The Lodge, as I called this shack, Marius gave up his kennel to an old woman from Écorcheville called Céleste, who came to cook for me, as I found old Cavalier's stews entirely inadequate.

'Now you know the characters and the scene. Here is the story!

'It was on October 15th, 1854; I remember the exact date and I shall never forget it. I left Rouen on horseback, followed by my dog Bock, a great Poitou pointer, broad of chest and strong of jaw, who hunted among the rushes like a Pont-Audemer spaniel.

'I had my haversack behind the saddle and my gun slung. It was a cold grey day with a high wind and dark clouds scudding across the sky. As I climbed Canteleu Hill, I had a view of the broad valley of the Seine, down which the river flowed in serpentine curves as far as one could see. On the left were the towering spires of Rouen, while on the right the prospect was bounded by distant wooded hills. Presently I made my way through the Forest of Roumare, sometimes at a walk, sometimes trotting, and about five o'clock I reached The Lodge, where old Cavalier and Céleste were waiting for me.

'For ten years at the same time of year I had been in the habit of arriving in the same way and the same two always greeted me with the same words: "Good-day, Sir! I hope you are in good health."

'Cavalier had hardly changed at all; like an old tree he was impervious to time. But Céleste, especially in the last four years, had become unrecognizable; she had as it were broken in half and, though still active, she walked with the top part of her body bent

forward at a right angle to her legs. The old woman, who was a devoted servant, always appeared deeply moved when she saw me again, and every time I went away she would say: "P'raps this'll be the last time, dear Master!" My poor old servant's sad anxious farewell made a strangely deep impression on my feelings every year; she was facing the inevitable approach of death without hope and with complete resignation.

'Well, I dismounted and while Cavalier, after I had shaken hands, led my horse to the small shed which acted as a stable, I went into the kitchen, which was also the dining-room, followed by Céleste. Soon the gamekeeper joined us. I saw at first glance that he had something on his mind; he seemed preoccupied, uneasy, and worried.

'I said: "Well, Cavalier, is everything all right?"

'He murmured: "Yes . . . and No! There's something wrong."

'I asked: "Well, what is it, my dear chap? Tell me all about it."

'But he shook his head: "No, not now, Sir! I don't want to bother you with my troubles when you've just arrived."

'I pressed him but he absolutely refused to go into the matter before dinner. By his face I realized that something serious was wrong. Not knowing what to say, I asked: "And what about the prospects of sport?"

' "Oh, as far as the game is concerned there's plenty about; you'll find all you want! Thank God! I've been able to see to that."

'He said this with such a serious, worried air that it was positively comic. His heavy grey moustache drooped as if it was about to fall from his lip.

'I suddenly realized that I had not seen his nephew.

' "What about Marius? Where is he? Why hasn't he shown up yet?"

'The gamekeeper started and, looking me straight in the eyes, cried: "Well, Sir, I had best tell you the whole thing straightaway—yes, that'll be best! Marius is the cause of all the trouble."

' "Oh, is he indeed? Well, where is he?"

“He’s in the stable, Sir; I was waiting for the moment to bring him in.”

“What has he been doing?”

“Well, here’s the whole story, Sir.”

“But the gamekeeper still hesitated; his voice was shaking and I hardly recognized it. His hollow cheeks showed deep lines and he looked an old man. He continued slowly: “Well, here goes! This last winter I found someone was setting snares in Rosary Wood but I couldn’t catch the fellow. I spent I don’t know how many nights out lying in wait for him but I had no luck. Then snares began to be set in the direction of Écorcheville. I was so vexed I started to lose weight but I couldn’t catch my man. It looked as if he knew my movements in advance, the blighter, just what I was going to do. But one day, while I was brushing Marius’ Sunday trousers, I found a couple of francs in the pocket. Now, where did he get that from, I wondered. I thought about it for a week and I noticed that he was in the habit of going out just at the moment I came in to go to bed – yes, Sir! So I kept an eye on him, without the least suspicion of the truth. One morning I let him see me go to bed; but I got up again at once and followed him. I’m a wonderful tracker, you know, Sir. Well, I caught him, Sir, I nabbed him actually setting snares on your property – and I’m your gamekeeper and he’s my nephew!

“I saw red and I thrashed him within an inch of his life on the spot. Yes! I gave him a proper leathering, I did, and I promised him that, when you came, he should have another in your presence to teach him his lesson. I was so ashamed I went right off my food. You know what it is when one is worried to death like that. But what would you have done, Sir? The boy has no father or mother, he’s got no one but me of his own blood. I kept him, I couldn’t give him the sack, could I? But I told him that, if he did it again, that was the end, the dead end – he wouldn’t have another chance. That’s all! Now, Sir, did I do right?”

“I grasped his hand, saying: “Yes, Cavalier, you did quite right; I entirely approve.”

'He got up: "Thank you, Sir! Now I'll go and get him; he must learn his lesson and take what's coming to him."

'I knew it was no good trying to dissuade the old man when he had once made up his mind; so I let him get on with it. He went and fetched the young rascal, dragging him in by one ear. I was sitting on a cane-bottomed chair as grave as a judge.

'Marius seemed to have grown and was even uglier than he had been the year before, with his sly, hang-dog look. His huge hands appeared positively monstrous. His uncle pushed him in front of me and said in his parade ground voice: "Now beg the Master's pardon!"

'The boy said nothing. Then, seizing him under his arm, the old policeman picked him up and began to thrash him so violently that I jumped up to stop him. The child was now howling: "For God's sake, stop, stop! I promise . . ."

'Cavalier put him down and by a pressure of his hand on one shoulder forced him to his knees: "Beg his pardon!" he cried.

'The young reprobate, with his eyes on the ground, mumbled: "I beg your pardon!"

'After that his uncle jerked him to his feet and despatched him from the room with a box on the ears that nearly knocked him down again. He ran away and I didn't see him again that evening. But Cavalier still seemed dreadfully upset.

' "He's a real bad lot!" he said.

'And all through dinner he kept repeating: "You don't know, Sir, how a thing like this gets you down - I can't get over it!"

'I tried to console him but it was no good. So I went to bed early in order to be ready to start my shooting at daybreak. My dog was already asleep at the foot of my bed when I blew out my candle.

'I was woken up about midnight by Bock barking violently and I immediately realized that the room was full of smoke. I jumped out of bed and struck a light and running to the door flung it open. An eddy of flame came in. The house was on fire. I hurriedly shut the

heavy oak door again and after pulling on my trousers I let the dog down by a rope made of my sheets knotted together and, after throwing my clothes, my game-bag, and my gun out of the window, I let myself down in the same way. Then I shouted at the top of my voice - "Cavalier! Cavalier!"

'But the gamekeeper did not wake; like all policemen he slept like a top.

'Through the lower windows I could see that the whole ground floor was a burning fiery furnace, it had been filled with straw so as to catch easily

'So it was a case of deliberate arson!

'I went on shouting madly. "Cavalier!" All at once it occurred to me that he was being suffocated by the smoke. I had an inspiration and slipping two cartridges into my gun I fired straight into his window so that the six panes splintered inwards. This time the old man did hear and he appeared, terrified, at the window, still in his shirt, blinded by the blaze which was now casting a dazzling glare on the whole front of the house.

'I shouted to him "The house is on fire! Jump out of the window! Quick! Quick!"

'The flames, suddenly bursting out of the openings on the ground floor, were now licking the walls, climbing up towards him and threatening to cut him off. He jumped and landed on his feet like a cat.

'It was not a moment too soon. The thatched roof split in the centre above the staircase, which acted as a sort of flue for the fire on the ground floor, and a great jet of flame shot up into the air, spreading out like the plume of a fountain and scattering a rain of sparks all round the cottage. In a few seconds the whole place was nothing but one huge bonfire.

'Cavalier, quite dazed, murmured: "How did it catch fire?"

'I answered: "The fire was started in the kitchen."

'He mumbled: "But who can have started it?"

'I suddenly guessed the truth and cried. "It was Marius!"

'The old man understood at once and stammered: "Oh, my God! That's why he didn't come in again."

'But a horrible thought flashed across my mind; I shouted: "And Céleste? Céleste?"

'He did not reply; at that moment the roof fell in before our eyes and the house was nothing but one huge blaze, dazzling, blinding, blood-red, a great furnace, in which the poor old woman must have been reduced to a red-hot mass of incinerated human flesh. We hadn't heard a single cry.

'But as the fire was spreading to the shed near by I suddenly remembered my horse and Cavalier ran to bring it out.

'Hardly had he opened the stable door when an agile figure darted out between his legs and sent him sprawling on his face. It was Marius, who ran away at full speed.

'In a flash the old man was up and started to pursue the fugitive but quickly realized that he had no chance of catching him. Then, carried off his feet by a surge of anger, he yielded to one of those impulses which cannot be foreseen or controlled, and seized the gun, which lay near him on the ground, took aim and, before I could move to prevent him, fired, without even knowing if it was loaded.

'One of the cartridges I had put in to give warning of the fire was still there undischarged. The shot hit the fugitive full in the back and brought him to the ground on his face, covered with blood. He immediately began scrabbling the ground with hands and knees as if trying to run on all fours, as a hare, mortally wounded, will do, when it sees the man who shot it coming up. I rushed forward, but the boy was already at his last gasp. He died before the fire in the house died down without having said a word. Cavalier, still in his shirt with bare feet, was standing stock still, dazed, close to us.

'When the villagers came on the scene, they took my gamekeeper away. It was as if his reason had gone.

'I appeared as a witness at the trial and gave a plain unvarnished account of what had happened. Cavalier was acquitted. But the

same day he left the neighbourhood and disappeared. I have never seen him since.

‘That, Gentlemen, is my shooting story.’

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The Legacy, Uncle Tony, Who Knows?, The Hautots, Father and Son, Mademoiselle Fifi, Old Vestey, Cemetery Walkers, Miss Harriet, The Pool, Prisoners of War, Monsieur Bush, Looking Back, The Withered Hand, The Question of Latin, and Monsicur Parent. (120)

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A SHORT HISTORY OF FRENCH LITERATURE

Geoffrey Brereton

A 297

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